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ABSTRACT

Following an introduction on "Taking Risks" (Martha Merson), this journal contains 11 articles on taking risks in teaching adult literacy, mostly by educators in the Boston area. The following are included: "My Dreams Are Bigger than My Fears Now" (Sharon Carey); "Making a Pitch for Poetry in ABE [Adult Basic Education]" (Marie Hassett); "Putting Lesbian and Gay Families in the Picture" (Charissa Ahlstrom); "Can I Keep This Book?" (Martha Merson); "Just Listen" (Adam Ross); "Discourse and Change: Working through Domestic Violence with Learners" (Anson Green); "Women Write a Reader's Theater Based on 'Push'" (Kate Power); "Personal Connections" (Dianne Roy); "Head for Change" (Joanne Arnaud); "Reading Whole Books in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages)" (Felipe Vaquerano); "Reading for Love (and Learning)" (Nancy Teel); and "'Seeing' the Essay" (Christine Luth). Notes about the authors are included in the issue. (KC)

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Connections: A Journal of Adult Literacy

volume viii
summer 1999
"Taking Risks"

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Connections is intended to provide an opportunity for adult educators, particularly those in the Boston area, to communicate with colleagues, both locally and nationwide. Adult literacy/adult basic education practitioners need a forum to express their ideas and concerns and to describe their students, their programs, and their own accomplishments; we are glad to be able to continue providing this opportunity.

We welcome your reactions to this journal or to any of the articles in it. We also want to strongly encourage teachers, counselors, administrators, aides, volunteers, students—everyone involved in this field—to think about sharing your experiences, your ideas, your problems and solutions with others by writing for the next issue of *Connections*. Please contact us; we'd be glad to talk with you about your ideas for an article.

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Introduction: Taking Risks

by
Martha Merson

The image on this cover of a mountain climber is a stereotypical picture of risk. In our culture, risk equates with daring acts that men take, putting themselves into physical danger. The danger, the speed, the adrenaline rush and admiration might tempt some to take such risks, but the prospect of becoming a paraplegic does not appeal to me at all. Even the brochures of screaming, happy rafters paddling through whitewater don't tempt me. I always contend that teaching satisfies any risk-seeking urges I might have. Hostage situations (and weapon-wielding students) aside, in the classroom anything can happen. As teachers, we can deviate from the expected. What happens next could surprise us, fulfill our hopes or send us scrambling.

Risk in the classroom can take one of many shapes. Risk can feel interpersonal. Violating students' expectations can lead them to withdraw from the program or to withdraw their affection. Most of us have felt the sting of unfavorable comparisons with other teachers. The risks can be professional: "Will I continue to be regarded as a competent teacher if students complain or my attrition rate rises?" As our own harshest critics, the risks can be personal, "If one more lesson bombs, I'm leaving the field." Negative feedback and self-criticism can lead us to choose the safety of the expected. Students may push us

to take risks we would otherwise avoid. "How will we be able to teach effectively if the topic makes us uncomfortable?" we reason. What you will find in this collection are articles by teachers who have dared to experiment, primarily in reading and writing instruction, and who write about a vision of how things could be better. They alter the format or the content of their instruction and hope that their students benefit.

The first article is Sharon Carey's. I approached her because her descriptions of class always sound a bit unusual. I thought she'd have something to say about taking risks with both content and form with her class. She, however, was more interested in finding out about her students' perceptions of risk. "We have this idea," she told me, "that it's difficult for students to come to adult basic education classes, but compared with the frightening circumstances that confront my homeless students, coming to school might seem easy. I want to know more about this concept of risk." Her article documents her findings, based on interviews with current and former students and their essay assignments.

Marie Hassett takes a different perspective on risk. She outlines the pressures on teachers to impart quantifiable skills:

> *Too often in the adult education classroom, although teachers may have a broad-based holistic image of what literacy is, we tend to teach only the most basic and functional skills and uses of reading and writing. Our students often struggle with a wide variety of challenges, inside and outside the classroom, and our impulse is to help them move along, master the requisite skills, earn the credential. But however well-intentioned our actions, when we teach the skills of literacy as if the ability to read a newspaper or fill out a job application is the goal of study, we deprive students of the opportunity to see reading and writing as ends in themselves. We cut them off from what has been most powerful, sustaining, and beautiful in our literary tradition, and we miss a very real chance to help students connect with other places, times and cultures that will have value to them both in the classroom and in their private lives.*

Yet she resists this pressure, taking a risk and devoting time to poetry. Using poetry is not really a risk in terms of how funders might judge the class but rather in how students will respond, since poetry is still seen as something only highly educated people enjoy.

Just as Marie risked bringing something into the class that students might not readily identify with, so did Charissa Ahlstrom. As an instructor for low-level ESOL students, she usually does a unit on family. This year she wanted to set the tone for equal sharing, and so she decided to make gay and lesbian family constellations an explicit part of the dialogues and images around which she structured conversations and activities. She used herself and her own lesbian family as an example for modeling language structures, thereby taking the risk of making her students uncomfortable.

While some risks are the result of calculated planning, others are sparked by an outside catalyst. While Adam Ross acknowledges that it is okay to make learners uncomfortable at times, the impetus for teaching about disabilities came from a decision to do writing in a different way. Felipe Vaquerano was spurred to use a whole book with his class when he heard that author Tana Reiff would be speaking at his program.

At times students push instructors to make changes. Dianne Roy designed her entire curriculum for the year around a Civil War theme when her students suggested they wanted more class time devoted to the theme of their discussion group and annual conference. Anson Green began to read the entire book *Push* with his class once one of his students questioned his decision to copy excerpts, avoiding the graphic sections.

One reason for the focus on reading and writing, and on literature, stems from an article, "Learning to Love Reading," by Donna Earle, published in *Focus on Basics*, Volume I, Issue B, May 1997. In her article she describes students who attended class regularly but who didn't make much progress in their reading. She encourages them to read more outside of class. Her article inspired, in the fall of 1997, a Boston-region mini-course called "Hooked on Whole Books." Since then, the Hooked on Whole Books Sharing Group has met regularly. Like Donna, many of us are continually seeking ways to help students improve their reading more quickly. Two articles in this collection specifically address this question. Joanne Arnaud writes about the Read for Change fundraiser sponsored by the Boston Adult Literacy Fund. Nancy Teel describes the several approaches she has tried with pre-College-English students. While these articles are not so much about risks with content, they do present experiments in format. The drive to fly higher, faster, to teach better motivates Nancy Teel as well as Chris Luth. In Luth's article, she documents what happens when she creates writing assignments, all with visual stimuli as a starting point.

I hope you find this collection exhilarating reading. The risks portrayed may seem small on the scale of human risk and accomplishment, but each choice made has had the potential to rock at least one person's world. I encourage you to build a new picture of risk: several figures, men and women, venturing together, a bit uncertain, but daring anyway, trying to reach a new teaching and learning peak. •

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"My Dreams Are Bigger Than My Fears Now"

by Sharon Carey

The setting for this study is Project Place, a 31-year-old social service agency in the South End of Boston, located on Rutland Street between Shawmut and Tremont. I have been teaching a GED/ABE class here for six years. Most of my students are homeless, which means that they live in shelters or transitional homes. A handful of students have Section-8 housing and a few survive on the street. They have been poor all their lives and most have never had permanent work. They left school around the tenth grade but for a variety of reasons do not have high school skills. They read, write and calculate on a low elementary school level and remember school as a series of dismal failures. Of the 350 students I have had to date, only one remembers school fondly. Most thought school was a crucible to be endured.

Back then they said they didn't care about finishing school, but now they have come back to earn a GED. One woman shared her reasons for returning when she wrote, "I want to come back because everyday I feel how important education is. If I could turn the clock back and get my high school diploma I would. By now I would have a good job and a place to live. I'd have a life." For many the GED is more than an academic award. It is proof that you *are* a different kind of person worthy of a new life. Entering students often state that they have

never finished a single thing in their lives, so earning a GED means you set a goal and reached it, which in turn means you have brains, maturity, drive and persistence. You can be proud. To quote one woman, "With my GED I can walk through doors with my head high." Students are realistic enough to know that doors of opportunity won't magically swing open when they pass the exam, but the feelings of pride and confidence that come with this award, students say, will give them the courage to fight for a better life.

First Day Fears

I remember shaking hands with students on opening day six years ago. Alice and Ruth were the people I remember most clearly. Ruth's hand trembled so badly she spilled her coffee, and Alice was ashamed because her palm was sweaty. We all joked to ease the tension and agreed that school can make a person very jittery. People told horrible school stories, detailing experiences as if they had happened yesterday. Someone was always called "the retard." Someone else was sent to "the Vice Principal's Resource Room" every day for six months to sit with her hands folded. Another was regularly asked to go to the board "and show us how not to do it." Everyone was shamed or whacked. I quickly assumed that taking this brave first step in returning to school was probably the hardest part of the process. Because of all the start-up pressures I was feeling as teacher, I didn't take the time to go beyond these stories and ask what specific doubts or fears they were dealing with. I thought they were probably feeling the same sense of anxiety that I feel in a new situation, and it would go away once we introduced ourselves and got down to business.

Wanting to defuse this fear as quickly as possible, I started class for many years with an editorial cartoon I had found in the *Christian Science Monitor*, entitled, "August (from memory)." The cartoon pictured a little boy swimming happily. Looming just beneath him was an enormous, mean-eyed, toothy shark. The word "SCHOOL" was emblazoned across the shark's belly in big, bold letters. The message, of course, was clear. Good times were over. That shark (i.e. school) was going to eat the boy alive. I assumed that everyone was feeling as vulnerable as this little boy, so this would be a good opening lesson. And students agreed. We studied the picture, talked about the message, listed fears on newsprint, told stories, wrote dialogues, then created new cartoons. We laughed as we realized we all shared similar worries and experiences, which immediately brought us together as a group. The exercise was cathartic. Students said they felt better and knew that this classroom was going to be different, safer. It was in this limited way I understood their fear. It was present early on, but if you faced it you could move it to the background and make students more comfortable; once they were at ease, they would try new things and gain confidence and eventually success where

they had failed before. One thing led easily to another.

When Martha Merson asked me to write about "risk" for *Connections*, I wondered if there was anything more to say about this sad but simple phenomenon. I talked to my daughter, who is an Oakland teacher and a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley. She always has ideas. She suggested that I shelve all my old assumptions and just look at risk-taking in my classroom for a few weeks. Collect people's writings; take field notes on class discussions, interview present and past students. With her long-distance assistance and Martha nearby, this is what I did. My study started with the question, "What is risk in adult education and how does it figure into the classroom experience?"

The Study

The timing seemed right. We were about to read *Warriors Don't Cry*, so thoughts of fear were in the air. *Warriors Don't Cry* is Melba Pattillo Beals' story of how she and eight other black teenagers risked their lives to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. She wrote of cruel and unimaginable indignities and injustices that she faced every day in school. This book turned out to be the perfect backdrop for a study of risk and fear, for, although students did not see themselves risking their lives to return to school, they readily identified with Melba's feelings of being unwanted and unworthy, which they said was exactly how they felt in high schools where hostile teachers and administrators seemed bent on making sure they failed. Students also identified with Beals' warrior status, for now they saw themselves engaged in a fierce struggle for missed educational opportunities.

I discovered that my original assumptions about fear were not inaccurate but were just a small piece of a much larger and more complicated story.

The book led to fascinating writings (essays, poems, plays), discussions in and out of class, and lively improvisations. For three weeks I gathered information from my sixteen students—ten women and six men—and then sat down and studied the collection of material. I discovered that my original assumptions about fear were not inaccurate but were just a small piece of a much larger and more complicated story. Risk actually formed a continuum and seemed to get more serious as time passed and it had a great deal to do with performance and persistence.

On March 8, 1999, we began by writing a twelve-minute essay on the topic: "A Time You Took a Risk." I was curious to know how my students would define risk. They wrote furiously for twelve minutes and then asked for more time. All students were pleased with their results and wanted to read them aloud. I include summaries of some of them here as a starting point: (Students' names have been changed.)

- Nora wrote about trying to kidnap her children so her husband wouldn't take them away.
- Donna wrote about walking out of a hospital with an IV needle hanging out of her arm because she was being treated so badly by her doctors.
- Thomas wrote about taking the blame for something he didn't do to protect a friend and then going to jail for eighteen months.
- Jim told of hitchhiking from Rochester to Philadelphia one winter night and almost being killed.
- Ruth read her story of marching into a neighborhood playground with an old baseball bat to tell gang boys to leave her kids alone.
- Judy told of "risking her life by staying in a room with a butterfly." When she was five, her brothers, who loved to trick her, filled her pillowcase with live butterflies. As she got ready for bed, she looked over and saw her pillow moving. She thought there was a spirit inside getting ready to carry her off. She froze and waited. Her brothers ran in laughing and released the butterflies. "I still can't be near a butterfly," Judy explained.
- Pedro wrote of "risking his life for thrills." With his heart "full of fear and joy," he would race across the Pan American Highway in El Salvador when he saw a tourist bus coming. He stopped racing the buses the day his puppy, Terry, was killed.

These stories, some involving life and death, did not surprise me. My students are high-rollers who have survived incredible dangers on the street and in shelters. How, I wondered, would going back to school fit into this picture? The fear of joining a GED class paled in the light of some of these experiences.

So the next day we wrote and talked about how risk figured into our school experience. Everyone agreed that the fear of returning wasn't as dangerous as racing a bus or facing what Melba Pattillo Beals did—verbal taunts from armed guards, a racist governor, a hostile student body—but it was frightening and did take courage. Thomas called it "First Day Fear," and went on to say, "You're always gonna be scared of the unknown. Everybody is." They defined the three unknowns that worried them most.

Getting a mean teacher was everyone's number one dread. They all had stories, but Gilda's received the most attention. She told about a time her teacher pushed her into a deep hole and left her there for three hours. Pedro sympathized with this experience, but stated angrily that a teacher who laughs at you is far worse than one who pushes you into a hole. All agreed.

Not fitting in was the second fear. "All those strange faces," Nora whispered almost to herself and then said, "Yeah, you walk in and look at everybody looking at you and wonder if there's a place for you." Judy reminded us how cruel a group can be and told of a time her classmates ganged up on her and cut her waist-length hair. "You think of these people from long ago when you come back to school." Pedro interrupted her and reminded us that classmates had the power to hurt you more by laughing at you or your ideas.

The third fear was thinking you might not be able to do the work. Ed said that when he enrolled in class, he feared his brain would be "too rusty." Alfred said, "Yeah, you hope things will come back to you, but they might not." Donna worried that there was nothing to come back to her. She didn't learn the material in the first place and now she might be "too old to absorb it." Kevin feared he had damaged his brain with drugs and alcohol and that this would prevent him from "holding onto things."

The class felt that they could judge these unknowns quickly. "After a couple of days," said Ed, "you sense that these things are going to be okay and your butterflies go away." (Judy begged, "Don't mention the butterflies!") "If things don't feel right, you drop out. There are other programs."

"So if the teacher, your peers and work look okay you stay and everything's smooth sailing. Right?" I asked.

"Well…not really. There are other things," Pedro offered.

I asked the group to list some of the things that made them feel uneasy when they first began. All contributed to the list, which included: writing, reading aloud, giving opinions especially when you disagree with someone, doing math, learning about computers, sharing private things about your life. Although they put this list together quickly, I had seen no evidence of these fears with this particular group. They wrote everyday with great energy and dedication and even my slowest readers (ones who needed help with every third or fourth word) fought for a turn to read aloud. Three students had joined the class that day, and although they paid lip-service to this discussion of classroom fears and prefaced their work by saying, "I can't write," they volunteered to read very personal essays (about jail, addiction and unemployment) that very first day. A day later I was stunned as my students read poems in front of six rather rude men who kept coming into our room to move furniture. Because the workers were commenting on class goings-on, I asked if the students wanted to wait until the outsiders left the room, but they said no, they didn't mind people listening. And later that week in math class, the shyest and least able student asked if she could do a problem on the board. "Wow, Marcia," said Jane. "You understand this problem!" "Oh no," said Marcia. "I'm going to the board because I don't understand it."

A partial explanation of this lack of fear and self-consciousness came from examining what students said motivated them at this point in their lives. Students recognized the risks involved in the daily classroom experience, but the drive to make up for lost time overrode these worries and gave an incredible urgency to their mission. Anne roughed out ideas for an essay she called "School Then—School Now" that illustrated this point:

School Back Then	*School Now*
Getting high	*No more games*
Having fun	*Getting serious*
Skipping class/ cutting school	*Ready to work*
Being bad	*Being determined*
Not following rules	*Desperate to make it*

All students said they recognized themselves in Anne's lists and agreed that, although they have "lots of fears," they have to put them aside for their goal, their "dream." Ruth said, "I have wasted too much time, too. Now I feel like a sponge that wants to soak up everything." Ernest said, "I've been wanting this for a long, long time. I feel so lucky and proud to be in a classroom again. I don't have time to be scared or waste a minute. I have to keep on keepin' on." And Donna said, "My dreams are bigger than my fears now. I have to hurry up before it's too late."

Perhaps the average age of my students, which is 34, had something to do with how they saw and balanced risk and opportunity. I asked if they thought age was a factor in this process. They all agreed that being older made them "see things differently." Marcia added another thought, "School was much scarier when you were young, cause you had no control." "Or confidence," added Thomas. "When you were a kid, you let people tell you you can't do it. Now I won't let others put me down." So with this self-determination, improved self-image and new sense of control, students said it was easier to be back in the classroom. I wondered what else it took to find peace of mind.

Peace in the Classroom

The Project Place classroom is not very glamorous, but it is bright and airy with lots of natural light pouring in on tables arranged in a square. Hundreds of donated books line the walls and colorful posters and maps hang at eye-level. I noticed that each person quickly claimed

his or her own space and was very possessive of that spot. If a new student sat in an already-claimed chair, she or he got a quick talk. "Oh, don't sit there. That is Roberto's place." People don't defend their own seats. They count on class members to do this for them. And there are small daily rituals—a lucky pen placed here, a favorite red dictionary there, consulting the *Boston Herald*'s horoscopes before class to learn new vocabulary, updates about what is happening in people's lives. They always offer each other encouragement and advice.

People spoke often and openly of respect and let new students know that this was the most important school rule, which means, for the most part, that people are kind to one another. This group reminded me constantly that the classroom is one of the few places where people really get to know each other through honest talk and are allowed to show genuine fondness for one another. Support and affection from the community put people at ease.

There seemed to be comfort and even joy when students felt a sense of belonging, knew the routine, were challenged by good material and could see evidence of their intellectual growth.

"Does this peace last, once it is established?" I asked.

"No!" said Ed, who had gotten his GED and was back visiting. The good times do not last, he explained, because soon students face what he called "the bigger risk." He went on to talk about the dangers inherent in becoming a part of the school community. You lose your "freedom of being invisible and you know this has happened when you miss a day of class and someone says the next day, 'Where were you?' Or, 'We didn't want to do the report without you.' Now there are expectations—which means you are in a position to let everybody, yourself included, down." Ed continued. "For me this was a bad time. People had always seen me as a failure—that's what I saw too. All of a sudden my teacher and classmates saw me as a good student, especially with my writing, so trying to see myself through their eyes

meant I had to rebuild my whole idea of myself. That's hard when you're a grown man."

"Yeah. It's like when you go into recovery and you find there's not much to recover and you have to start from scratch," said Ernest.

How hard and unsettling to start rebuilding a self-image at this stage of life. Where do you begin? How do you put aside all you have thought about yourself and the things that have defined you, much of it negative, and start thinking of yourself in positive ways? As Matthew observed, "Change [like this] is the hardest. You have to dig down deep inside you every day and put your heart and soul into it to keep going and not run away."

Many admitted to leaving programs when expectations got too high. One said, "I felt stressed out. I knew I couldn't do what I said I would, and what others thought I could, so I had to take time off—telling myself I'd go back later." I was reminded of an older student I had had years ago who must have felt this pressure, for he made the same stern announcement to me every morning, "I'm here, but I ain't makin' no promises." I guess when you commit to a class you are making promises to

yourself and others and putting yourself on dangerous and unfamiliar ground. And the likelihood of failing is always present.

I realized that only men were involved in this discussion; I asked the women if they agreed and they said they saw things a little differently. They understood what the men were saying, but felt that other people's faith in you made you feel good and work harder. "When someone believes in you it helps you believe in yourself," said Nora. All the women's heads nodded. Anne added, "Admitting you care and want something better is the biggest risk for me. It's scary to say you care and want to succeed cause then you can be hurt so bad, but when other people have faith in you and think you can do it, it gives you the courage to hang in there—not give up."

My students' bravery has always amazed and impressed me....

In addition to peer and teacher pressure, the women talked about added pressures they felt—the hopes and expectations their own children had and the modeling they needed. "I can't tell my kids to stay in school if I don't, can I?" Another mentioned her kids are always checking to see if she did her homework. "They want me to do good work and sometimes that makes me crazy and mad." The women admitted to these pressures but again agreed that this would probably be their last chance to get an education. Anne received loud approval when she said, "We don't have time for any more fear and embarrassment."

I realized at this point that I had thought of adult learners in a generic way, without regard to gender or age. I now had to rethink my theories in light of these findings which suggested that age and gender affect the learners' attitudes. This was difficult to think about—teacher encouragement might motivate women to continue, but the same praise might drive the men from the classroom.

The Biggest Risk: The Test

Students who get this far without dropping out face the biggest challenge, which is the test. Even people who have been tempered by success in school are terrified by tests, so I cannot begin to imagine the depth of fear my GED students must feel as they think about this examination. Judged by the reactive behavior I've observed through the years, this is definitely a paralyzing part of the process, and it is coupled with sad thoughts of leaving a community that some say "feels like family." When people enroll in our program they put together an educational plan which includes a projected test date. As the date draws near, things happen. Students speak daily of not being ready, or forgetting everything they ever knew; they tell terrible stories about things that have happened to other people—the test examiner was rude, the room was so cold you couldn't think, someone started on the wrong line and filled in the wrong bubbles all the way down and scored a zero.

Flight comes in various forms. People just disappear, or they get sick, or a family member gets sick and they have to care for him or her, or they have to take a temporary job or move, or worst of all, they relapse. All said they feared this test would find them lacking and all their efforts would have been for nothing. Joe, a student who was getting ready to register for the test, wrote about it every day. One essay started, "I fear my GED test." He wrote this sentence three times, each time in bigger letters and went on to say, "I try hard to have positive thoughts. When the fear creeps in I tell it to 'hit the road, Jack.' I just don't want to fail again." And for some it is more complicated. Another student said he actually feared passing the test because then he would have no excuse for not making big changes in his life, and this was sometimes too much to think about. Another said she woke up some nights worrying about taking the test and failing and other nights she woke and decided not to take the test but saw that as a failure, too. She wrote:

> *Failure is a greater teacher than success. I am writing about the above statement. I agree with it 100%. If I took my GED test and didn't pass—would I quit? I doubt it. Because I've learned from my life experience that the only time I fail is when I stop trying. If I am or anyone else was always 100% right then where would be the room for growth or improvement?*

If we could get people to adopt this positive attitude, the notion of fear and failure would certainly shift, but this is a hard thing to do when the goal all along has been something so tangible and weighty.

What Did I Learn?

I came to this study with simple ideas about students' risk-taking. People were nervous about starting school again, especially since it represented failure, and I felt these fears could be dealt with by providing opening day discussions and a safe and respectful classroom where students could see and mark competencies and successes. I was dealing with the tip of the iceberg.

I ended the study overwhelmed with new information and unnerved by exactly what to do with it. Risk, I found, formed a continuum that got more complicated and serious as time went on and affected student performance and persistence. The continuum started with

butterflies and bad memories (which now seem to be the easiest problems to deal with) and then moved to academic and personal doubts and fears that got people talking about rebuilding images of themselves and then acting on them, which may be far more difficult and frightening than facing a gang on the playground or racing a bus. The continuum ends with a seven-and-a-half-hour exam that for many is the indicator of important things to come. My students' bravery has always amazed and impressed me, but, after having looked behind the scenes, I am astounded that anyone could deal with all these internal and external obstacles and survive, let alone succeed. And they do.

I plan on spending a lot more time thinking about my study, but here is the beginning of a list of things I think are important to provide for students:

- An opportunity to talk about risk and assess it during the initial interview so that this topic could become an ongoing conversation, not a crisis management issue
- Support and counsel when people send out coded messages about school demands and pressures getting too great
- Solid preparation for the test
- Test-taking strategies
- A person from class who has passed the test to visit and coach and encourage and answer questions
- A testing partner
- Pep talks by teachers and peers
- Relaxing exercises to reduce stress
- Lucky pencils or some talisman
- A role model.

I don't think there is a way to make test-taking a pleasant experience, but little things certainly help. (Solid preparation is a given.) I found that it helps to invite someone who has survived the test back to talk about the experience. Just being told which bus to take or what the room looks like dispels some of that exam mystique which goes back to students' original fears of the unknown. Getting a student to take the test with a classmate is helpful for some. Teacher pep talks are good, but some students think at this point you are a bit like a devoted mother who will only say the nice things, so it's great to hear encouragement from fellow students. One student's face lit up when another student said, "You rock in every area. No way you gonna fail. Just keep saying to yourself, 'Here comes the genius.' Cause that's what you are." Statements like this can certainly help shore up a student's shaky new self-image.

Someone suggested giving out little lucky charms (e.g. angel charms, lucky ducks, magic pencils) saying, "It's nice to have something to hang onto." I suggest that a role model is another thing a student can hold onto, and that's why I'm glad we read *Warriors Don't Cry*. Although I didn't plan this, Melba Pattillo Beals became everyone's hero. My students were stunned by her strength and asked again and again if this were really a true story. They said she helped make them feel like warriors, for they too were fighting for an education so they would not be left behind again. The class wrote letters to Beals, thanking her for the strength she passed along to them. Donna wrote "Melba, you inspired me to want to get out there and get what's rightfully mine." Anne wrote, "You gave me the strength to fight for the changes I need in my life. I am a warrior now and I will not cry. You have truly lifted me." Another wrote, "It's like you have a hand on my shoulder and everyone needs that." Everyone—old and young, men and women—agreed. And Tanya wrote a poem, which she introduced by saying, "I wrote this poem for Melba and for us," before reading it to the class.

"Don't Cry"

Are you a leader? Or do you love 2 follow,
Do you live 4 2day? Or plan a'head 4 2morrow.
Do you have hopez, n-tensionz? achieve?
Or iz hope something you chooz not 2 b-lieve.
Iz it a struggle 4 you 2 make it?
And when you see Risk do you chooz 2 take it?
And when there'z pain do you even cry?
Dear soldier, wipe them from your eyez. Don't cry.
There be somedayz when you feel all hope iz gone,
You're weary and tired, friend it won't be 2 long.
Thoze dayz of being beat down and left for shame,
You know whoze suspect but can't even blame.
Waz it that white man that told you that you can't have?
Do you see Victory? Take it, it'z yourz 2 grab.
You are a fighter, you must b-lieve in win,
If you fail once alwayz try again.
Neva let fear hold you back, don't live a lie,
Know that real warriorz: Don't Cry.
Real warriors are ready 4 battle in the middle of the field,
With faith in God who iz thee only shield.
So when you feel that all hope iz gone,
Fall 2 your kneez and pray until the setting of the dawn.
And when you feel them tearz forming in your eyez,
Just say 2 yourself, real warriors Don't Cry. •

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Making a Pitch for Poetry in ABE

by
Marie Hassett

One of my favorite books about teaching reading and writing, *Schools of Thought*, includes the following statement:

> *Literacy's most profound function is to help connect the individual with larger and larger circles of reference, which ultimately come to constitute the meaning of his or her life... Having a very limited, secular, utilitarian view of literacy—as a means to employment, for instance—we have invented a kind of teaching that cuts literacy off at the roots, diminishing both its appeal and its capacity to empower. (Brown, p.90)*

When I first read this, I was an education professor, training students to become high school teachers. The book was part of one of my courses, and we discussed this quote at great length. We talked about the pressures on schools to teach "marketable" skills, and the ways that legislative demand for quantifiable assessment of students' learning made it difficult to teach some of the things we thought were important. I recently reread the book from my current perspective as an adult educator and consultant. What struck me most forcefully was the increased challenge of looking at literacy in this way while

working with adults, and the simultaneously increased need to do so. Too often in the adult education classroom, although teachers may have a broad-based, holistic image of what literacy is, we tend to teach only the most basic and functional skills and uses of reading and writing. Our students often struggle with a wide variety of challenges, inside and outside the classroom, and our impulse is to help them move along, master the requisite skills, earn the credential. But however well-intentioned our actions, when we teach the skills of literacy as if the ability to read a newspaper or fill out a job application is the goal of study, we deprive students of the opportunity to see reading and writing as ends in themselves. We cut them off from what has been most powerful, sustaining, and beautiful in our literary tradition, and we miss a very real chance to help students connect with other places, times and cultures in ways that will have value to them both in the classroom and in their private lives. My own struggle to incorporate literature into the classroom, has been a lengthy one, and not without failures along the way. But I hope the story of that struggle will help other teachers who are trying, as I am, to balance students' immediate, pressing needs with the desire to open up to students the power that we find in literature of all kinds.

[Students] are beginning to see themselves as readers and thinkers in ways that I do not think they would if we were working with safer, easier material.

In *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun's best-selling study of women's biographies and autobiographies, she writes:

> *What matters most is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. (p.37)*

This idea that we need to know stories in order to make sense of our own lives has been the organizing principle I've used to select, organize, and teach literature in my Basics II classroom. In order to help my students connect with others, to see themselves as part of larger and larger communities, I have thought about story. What stories do we tell each other? Who gets to hear which story, and which version of any given story do we share? How do we see our lives, and how do we want others to see us? I admit freely that it took time, and a singular experience with a student to be able to put these ideas into words, but the impact of the changes I've made has been profound and lasting, for me as a teacher, and for my students.

My curricular epiphany was the gift of a student. He had been placed in our program's beginning literacy course, but that teacher quickly came to the conclusion that Sterling (the student) had been misassigned, and asked me if I would take him. On the night that Sterling first entered my class, the writing assignment was "Why have you come back to school?" The rest of the class had already begun writing, and I expected from Sterling what I expected from the others—approximately one paragraph of hard-won, laboriously written prose. But after the others had finished, Sterling continued to write. He finished just as we took our break and handed his paper to me before going outside for a cigarette. I glanced at it briefly, then rushed to the copier to make duplicates for the other teachers in the program. Sterling had written a kind of prose poem—a spare, eloquent and moving piece about the challenges he had faced and the ways that he had tried to overcome them.

After the break, I sat down to talk with Sterling, and told him how good I thought his paper was. He stared at me for a moment, looked around, and said, "Are you talking to me?" He seemed unable to believe that I could think so highly of his work, even after I told him (quite truthfully) that his was one of the best pieces of writing I had ever received as a teacher, at any level. And although Sterling stayed in my class for about two months after that, until he took and passed the GED exam, I don't think I was able to make him see the quality of his writing in the same way that I did.

In retrospect, the reasons for Sterling's shock at my response to his writing seem more obvious and understandable. He had spent very little of the last twenty-five years of his life reading stories of any kind; he heard stories from day to day, but he was not in the habit of reflecting on the quality of the stories he heard, nor was he thinking about the difficulty so many people experience when they try to commit a story they've told to paper. The differences between a good story told orally and a good story told on paper may be subtle, but they are critical to making the story real for a reader. Working with Sterling made me want to give my students a broader and deeper experience of story, but I was unsure about how to proceed. I wanted material that would interest and excite my students, that would be challenging but not impossibly difficult. I wanted to include works by writers of different cultures and time periods, and I wanted the real thing, not the retelling of a classic story in watered-down language that would communicate the plot, but elimi-

n.'e the power and subtlety of the original. Given that my students are adults with reading skills that range from about a third- to a sixth-grade level, this would seem to be no easy task.

My search is not over, and there are days when I pore over book after book in despair, wondering how much farther I will have to go to augment my growing collection of materials, but I have found a tool that serves my purpose—poetry. I am still shocked, writing this, to find myself a champion of poetry in the classroom. In the past, I tried to avoid teaching poetry if I could, knowing that many students have been trained through less-than-ideal experiences to see it as irrelevant, boring, and a waste of time. There have been many days when I've begun class not knowing whether the material I've selected for us will be warmly accepted or thinly tolerated.

Although we don't always like to admit it, much of education, at every level, is a search for "right answers." We teach many subjects as if they were puzzles to be solved, or rules to be mastered. This might work well in some, limited areas of some subjects, but it's a deadly, deadening way to teach people how to read and write. Students who spend most of their time mastering rules, filling in the blanks, and completing multiple-choice-laden worksheets may become passive consumers of the printed word as it is set before them, but they are no nearer to becoming readers and writers in any meaningful sense than they were before they stepped inside the classroom. Poetry cannot be taught well in those formats, and that may be why it's taught so little and so poorly in many schools today. But if the goal is to help students read and think about stories and language, sample a variety of writers, and see connections between the concerns of writers and their own, daily concerns, then poetry is an excellent medium.

Poetry has a great deal to offer my students. It is, first of all, a compact form, which allows us to read whole poems in one class, generally more than one. This brevity also allows me to select material with slightly more complex and challenging language. Because there are fewer words than there would be in a longer prose work, I have the time to define all the words that are unfamiliar to my students. The language of poetry tends to be concrete and specific, which helps readers to develop pictures in their minds of the scenes that the poet creates. I am far more comfortable using poetry from a variety of time periods and traditions than I would be in attempting to do the same with prose works, for many of the reasons above. As a result, my students encounter a far broader range of voices and traditions. They also have a chance to see how writers in different times and cultures have addressed similar themes.

Recently, as part of Boston Public Library's celebration of National Poetry Month, I took my students to a lecture by Molly Peacock, past president of the Poetry Society of America, entitled, "How to Read a Poem." I had gotten copies of the poems she would be discussing prior to the lecture, so that my students and I could read through them in class. Peacock had chosen "Let Evening Come," by Jane Kenyon; "No Worst, There is None," by

Gerard Manley Hopkins; and "Wulf and Eadwacer," by an anonymous tenth-century English woman. These are not typical choices for an adult literacy class, and not necessarily poems I would have chosen on my own. But my students were able to read and understand them with far less difficulty than I might have anticipated. We talked about the similarities and differences in language, subject, and style, and the different worlds the poets lived in. When we attended the lecture, I was pleased not only by the number of students who attended, but by the way Peacock's readings of the poems built on our own. I have often told students that there can be more than one "correct" interpretation of a poem, but listening to the audience as they presented different ideas and seeing Molly Peacock respond to each interpretation as a real possibility was a tremendous reinforcement.

Since I began significantly increasing the amount of time devoted to poetry in my class, I have seen a number of positive changes in my students. One of my informal criteria for selecting poems is that they be strongly rhythmic; they needn't rhyme, but the structure of the poem should help the reader to figure out how to pronounce unfamiliar words, and which words to stress. The impact has been a greater willingness to read out loud on the part of all students and a reduction in the number of mispronunciations. Students demonstrate greater confidence in their reading skills, which carries over to other kinds of text; one student, who previously preferred not to read, now not only reads, but helps others sound out words. When we read "Children's Story" by Ricky Walters, a poem that tells the story of a young man seduced into a life of crime, chased by police, and shot, we had a long discussion about the possible meanings of the title that helped us think about the interrelationships between irony, sarcasm, and tragedy, though we did not label it as such. Abelardo Delgado's poem "Stupid America" gave us a chance to talk about racism and ethnic identity in American society. We read "Casey at the Bat" to mark the opening of the baseball season, and talked about comedy in poetry. One student had seen the Disney cartoon based on the poem, and told the rest of us about the differences between the original and the Disney version, leading us to think about other things that have been "Disnefied."

In her book *Writing Down the Bones*, Natalie Goldberg laments that:

> *Poems are taught as though the poet has put a secret key in his words and it is the reader's job to find it. Poems are not mystery novels. Instead we should go closer and closer to the work.... Stay close to them. That's how you'll learn how to write. Stay with the original work. (p.31)*

Most teachers were themselves taught according to the "secret key" method, and overcoming that training can challenge even the most well-intentioned among us. But I can assure you, it's worth it. Making poetry a cornerstone of my literacy curriculum has enriched and expanded my sense of what is possible for my students. They are beginning to see themselves as readers and thinkers in ways that I do not think they would if we were working with safer, easier material. I see improvements in their reading, their writing, and the ways that they think about what they read.

Last week, in preparation for a poetry workshop we'll be attending, I was reading some of the poetry of Martín Espada with my class. We were getting through the poems I had copied more quickly than anticipated, so I asked the class to take a look at the next poem while I went to copy one more. When I returned, they were all laughing, and when I asked them why, one student said, "It's this poem; it's funny!" The poem in question, "DSS Dream," is funny, and I had laughed when I read it before class. I knew my students would enjoy it, but I was far more excited about their response than I would have been if I had been the one leading them through the poem.

Ultimately, I want my students to be independent thinkers, readers, and writers. I want them to read both for information and for pleasure, and I want them to be able to use reading and writing as tools to help them make sense of their lives. The poet Kathleen Norris has insisted that "poets speak with no authority but that which the reader is willing to grant them," that poets do not attempt to convince readers, but instead, "suggest, evoke, and explore" topics of interest (p.37). My students and I have chosen to let poets speak to us, granting them the authority to share their experience. In the process, our own experience has been deepened and enriched.

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Putting Lesbian and Gay Families in the Picture

by Charissa Ahlstrom

Adult educators need to write down and share their lessons that include gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) issues. Published adult education materials that include GLBT people and concerns are incredibly scarce. This lack of resources is certainly true when discussing the topic of family, which will be my focus for this article. Many workbooks and texts continue to use family trees and define families as one mother, one father and various children. There are some texts that helpfully expand this notion of family to include divorced, extended and single-parent families. However, even these latter texts usually fail to use any lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender terms. For example, the low-level reader, *Many Kinds of Families* (New Readers Press), which actually includes a family of two men and a daughter, still does not use "gay" or any gay-related terms in its exercises. The absence of the word "gay" reiterates to readers who might understand the relationship as a gay relationship that it is taboo to discuss such a word aloud. The men's relationship remains ambiguous, so teachers can even avoid discussing gay relationships if they choose. Therefore, it is important for those of us who want to clearly address sexual preference to document our lessons so we have some materials with which to work.

It is critical for educators to address GLBT issues in

the classroom for several reasons. First, there are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students in our classes, whether teachers are aware of it or not. Although I believe curricular topics should arise from students, I urge teachers not to wait until they know a student is gay to begin affirming their identity in the classroom, nor to wait until the issues are raised by the students themselves. Students might feel threatened if they acknowledge their sexual preference openly, or might feel awkward discussing a gay family member. It is also incomplete to discuss families and never to include gay and lesbian families. This omission contributes to the silence that burdens GLBT people. In addition, English classes are an important source of information and advocacy for immigrant students. GLBT students can greatly benefit by having their identities affirmed, and being aware of GLBT resources.

There are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students in our classes, whether teachers are aware of it or not.

Affirming different sexual preferences in the classroom is equally important for GLBT teachers. They do not have the luxury to wait until it comes from the class, particularly for those of us who value teacher involvement in personal sharing. Class time should be a community-building and trust-building space. If I want others to feel comfortable sharing information about their families, I need to share it myself. In class we might ask each other about our weekends, holidays, families and homes, and so gay and lesbian "issues" are brought up regularly in classes in which I participate.

Background

I am a teacher and coordinator in the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Department at Jamaica Plain Community Centers' Adult Learning Program. I am a white woman in a lesbian relationship, raised middle class in New York City, and currently work with a class of Latino, Haitian, and African adult learners. I assume all the work I do is affected by these elements. I teach a beginning level class (the second level in our program), and the following ideas will reflect my work with this particular group. Many lessons, however, are suited for other levels with minimal adjustments.

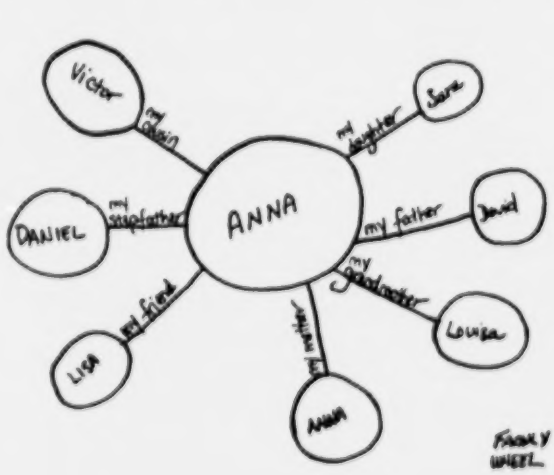
I gathered the following activities from class sessions that addressed family issues this past year. For the purpose of this article, I have selected those lessons that involved discussion of gay and lesbian families, as well as activities that allowed participants to define "family" themselves. Each month our class focused on one primary theme in combination with specific grammar and life skills. For example, in April, 1998, we looked specifically at the topic of "family," basic prepositions, alphabet review, and oral presentations.

I present this list as one example of how to include lesbian and gay family issues in the context of teaching ESOL. It is only within the last year that I have been out as a lesbian in class and intentionally included lesbian and gay issues in lessons. While it is relevant to the class community in which I work, I have not yet effectively developed lessons around bisexuality or transgender issues. I am learning more each time how to be inclusive, and I hope this piece helps inspire a broader collection of lessons that reflect all families.

Activities That Leave the Shape and Definition of "Family" to the Individual

Many of the following activities developed from ideas shared from other teachers and some workshops over the last six years. These activities effectively include students who have step-families, large extended families, gay/lesbian families and families where there might be different co-parenting or polygamous situations. All of these types of families have been represented in the classes in which I have worked. These lesson ideas encourage the class to build community, as students share and see similarities and differences between themselves and their families. The activities also reveal key topics on students' minds that help the teacher create meaningful curricula.

1. Define family. I asked students to write down a definition of family and then share the definitions—either aloud or on newsprint. Sometimes I added my own



definition or added a dictionary definition. This process allowed the class to reflect on the meaning of family and compare how different individuals might include different circles of people in their definitions.

2. Family wheels. I asked students to draw a circle with their names in the middle. Then they drew lines from the circle and wrote the names of all family—immediate, extended and other—in circles at the end of each line. I encouraged students to write the name of the relationship on the line. I demonstrated my wheel first and had them create their wheels. (See sample on previous page.) This activity allowed students to add anyone to the circle, without needing to fit their family into the traditional family tree format. In addition to excluding some participants, the traditional family tree structure can be very difficult for some students to understand. They can get too caught up in the format when the focus is sharing information about their family.

3. Family location charts. I had students fill out charts, listing names of relatives in Massachusetts, in other states, in their native country, and in other countries. I encouraged students to write the name of the state, city, or country next to the name of the person. We went around and shared our charts. (For example, "Amina is my sister. She lives in the Sudan.") Students then came up and put dots (dots were colored circle stickers) on a world map, indicating the regions where they had family. The smaller the dots and the bigger the map, the better. In addition to being inclusive of all families, this activity allowed us to see visually where people have relatives. In my class it allowed some students from different countries to see that they have family in the same state, and it inspired discussions about why some families are spread out or needed to flee their countries.

4. Discussion/writing assignments. Usually I had the class discuss a writing topic before they wrote so they had ideas and vocabulary already in their minds when it was time to write. Topics I've used include: a) Think of the youngest person in your family. Write a story or description of this person. (I've also tried the same with the oldest person.) and b) How is your life different from your parents' lives? or How is your life different from your children's lives? or What are some differences between families here and families in your country? This assignment builds a sense of community between the students, as they tend to share very special feelings toward relatives and/or strong beliefs about family life and difficulties they might have here.

5. Family problems. This activity is based on a popular-education strategy I learned at a Brecht Forum workshop in New York City in which one sees, analyzes and acts on the problem at hand. First, I suggested students work in groups and make lists on newsprint of problems that families have in their communities. It is more productive to say "problems in your communities," rather than "in your families" so people (including myself) do not feel they need to reveal painful difficulties at home, yet have the freedom to bring up the relevant topics. I gave an example of how gay women and men sometimes have pressure not to talk about their lives or partners within extended families. After sharing their lists with the whole class, students returned to their small groups to draw or create a collage that would visualize one or two of the problems they listed. We have a huge stack of old magazines that students used if they didn't want to draw. After sharing their drawings, they brainstormed and wrote down ideas of how to work toward solving these problems. By this time in the class, the activity was a little long—it might be better to spread it out over two or more days. There was not a lot of energy for the last problem-solving piece, so for the next day I chose one problem that seemed to come up for each group (teen smoking and drinking) and found a brief reading on it. After reading it together, students brainstormed on how to work on the particular problem.

Integrating Gay and Lesbian Vocabulary & Themes into Language Exercises and Readings

1. Definitions: I gave out the following list of words related to family:

widow	adopted
lesbian	divorced

pet	step-father
half-sister	great-grandmother

We had already discussed some words briefly, but some were new. Students worked in pairs or groups of three and were given two or three words on a sheet of paper. They needed to write a definition for each word. While they could come up with the answers as a group, each individual was asked to do the actual writing of one definition. Students could write the definition on their own, or could use a dictionary. Using dictionaries reinforced our alphabet review, and in addition, many students wanted to practice using an English dictionary.

2. Guessing the word. In this activity, I gave each person a word written on a piece of paper:

step-mother	gay
cousin	nephew
aunt	foster parents
great-grandmother	brother-in-law

They needed to explain the word, and the rest of us would guess what it was. We had discussed all the words before, so it was a review activity. If a person forgot the meaning, or had trouble explaining it, s/he could ask a person next to her/him, but then that person wouldn't participate in guessing.

3. Word jumbles. I gave them a set of letters mixed up and they needed to put them together to form the following words about family. This was another way to review and be comfortable with spelling and letters. This was harder than I had expected, so while I first encouraged individuals to do it, ultimately folks worked in groups.

stepfather	children
daughter	boyfriend
interracial	uncle

partner (this turned out to be particularly difficult because if you take out one of the "r's," you could spell "parent," which was another word we reviewed)

4. Pictures of gay/lesbian families. Pictures are great as a basis for discussion and writing. One can find photos of GLBT folks and families in gay-friendly magazines and newspapers. Around gay-pride day there might be some pictures in mainstream papers. Photos in particular can be helpful for visualizing real people if you have so far only discussed gay/lesbian families in the abstract. For example, some students had difficulties understanding me when I spoke about my partner and her daughter. In my case, I brought in my photos during our family photo-sharing days, which made my relationship clearer to students. The word "partner" is confusing because some people are familiar with the term "partner" in business. In addition to pictures, I try to write the word "partner," as well as "lesbian" and/or "gay" on the board when I'm explaining my relationship, because in Romance languages the words "lesbian" or "gay" can be similar. In other cases, people might write these words down and look them up in their language dictionaries. If you just say "partner" or "lesbian," people often are confused or think it is their lack of English that makes them misunderstand.

5. Articles. I began collecting newspaper articles on gay families this summer. Another ESOL educator gave me one from the *Boston Globe* that was particularly effective in addressing both gay families and foster-care issues. It was from the October 7, 1997, edition in the Metro Region section, with the headline, "Foster ruling stands up: State placed boy in gay household." I used four paragraphs from the article that summarized how a biological father contested his son being placed in a gay foster home. After reading the article in groups, they discussed the questions, "What are experiences of gay parents in your country? and "Are there 'foster parents' in your country?" and then came back to the whole group to share. Those who shared their ideas about gay families all said that it wasn't talked about in their countries. One said, "If someone is gay in the family, it is secret," and "People don't talk about it like here." With regard to foster parenting, some students had personal experiences with the Department of Social Services and have felt fearful that DSS might take their children away and put them in foster homes. Others had considered being foster parents themselves. Those people who shared their expe-

riences said there were no foster families in their countries. Working in groups allowed students to share other opinions without having to share them with me or the whole group.

6. Family literacy. One month many students chose to read, practice and present a children's book to the whole class. They could choose any book, but I brought in many choices that students could pick as well. I could have taken time to bring in more gay-friendly children's books, but only brought in one: *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dads, Blue Dads,* by Johnny Valentine. In the summer, one student chose to read it, but we did not discuss its gay content. It is a fun light-hearted book and, in a very entertaining and subtle way, approaches serious themes of understanding different families. One can read it, though, without clearly addressing the gay family—the fact that the children have two fathers can be interpreted as part of the light-hearted comical aspect of the book, like having blue fathers. For more gay-inclusive children's books in the Boston/Cambridge area, one can visit the New Words bookstore in Cambridge or the Glad Day bookstore in Copley Square. Many women's or gay-friendly bookstores have a children's section. In addition, one can get a listing and description of a few gay-friendly children's books by sending a written request to: Alyson Publications, 6922 Hollywood Blvd., Tenth Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90028.

Results and Responses

Introducing gay and lesbian issues to the classroom and being out was easier than I expected. Students did not attack or challenge my identity in a confrontational manner. I did not feel they disrespected me as a teacher. I do believe all these hypothetical responses are possible in some situations, but it has not yet been my experience. The fact that I am their teacher plays a role in their response. There is inherent social power for someone in a teacher position that can prevent students from outwardly disrespecting the teacher. One time a substitute teacher was facilitating a discussion of gay/lesbian issues in the class, based on looking at a picture of homophobic graffiti. One or two students in this setting did communicate that gay and lesbian relationships were against their religion and they did not approve of them. As a straight-identified substitute, she might have elicited more negative responses than I would have. The responses I received were not all positive; I did receive some negative personal expressions (body language) when I explained that I have a relationship with a woman, and some expressions of disdain for my choice. More than one student asked, "Why? or "You don't like men?"

On the whole, the experience has been meaningful and effective. The positive experiences encouraged me as a teacher to be out in the classroom, and gave me a solid starting point for continuing to address GLBT issues in the future. I found that some learners were sincerely interested in asking questions about gay men and lesbians. Some asked, "Are there churches that have gay people?" and one student asked me more than once to explain lesbian relationships. He understood gay male relationships, but did not understand how women had relationships together. In many cases, people were curious and interested, maybe even in a scandalous kind of way, as discussing the topic broke a social taboo. Many others expressed interest in understanding my relationship and expressed no disagreement with my family choices. These learners are now more informed about the gay community and had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss how gay people are treated in their countries. They have names to put on these "taboo" relationships and have been exposed to them in a way that validates the relationships within regular discussions about family. I urge adult educators—straight and gay—to introduce gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues in the classroom. Sharing the results of these experiences, both positive and negative, will enable us to develop increasingly better strategies and curricula that are inclusive of all peoples and families.

I want to thank the A.L.R.I. and Martha Merson for supporting me in this project and making it possible. Thanks also to the Page 4 Coalition, a collection of educators looking at issues of sexual identity and GLBT issues as they affect adult education. This group has been an important resource for me as I have begun to intentionally explore lesbian and gay issues in adult education. Finally, many thanks to those who gave me ideas and input for the project: Jeremy Earp, Emily Singer, Georgia Hall and Richard Goldberg. •

Can I Keep This Book?

by
Martha Merson

The moments when a class is humming along are moments to treasure. At times I am as superstitious as anyone fearing that if I speak aloud about success, it will instantly disappear. Whether such moments are a function of careful planning or good instinct, they are important to analyze. Frequently people focus on mistakes and learn from what is going wrong. But as a good friend says, "Any fool can point out what is going wrong. It takes much more concentration to see what is going right." I recount here some of the experiences I had in the winter of 1998 when I visited several GED and ABE classes as a guest teacher. It is because so much seemed to be going right that I wanted to record what happened and explore why it worked.

In my job as a staff development resource person to ABE and GED programs in Boston, I work with teachers on curriculum and plan staff development events. When I go to classes, I often co-teach or observe or pilot a lesson from a developing curriculum. I am grateful to all the teachers who share their classes, set up the class to welcome me, and spontaneously take whatever role suits them and the moment. In 1998, my motivation for visiting was to publicize the "Readers Talk to Writers" Series co-sponsored by the A.L.R.I. and the Boston Public Library. The BPL's literacy services coordinator

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and I had chosen authors whose work would be of interest to learners, but whose names were not yet household words (and therefore whose honoraria were affordable). My goal was to introduce the authors' work in a way that would entice learners to come to the readings. In preparation for the authors' visits, I worked with sixteen different classes in all, usually for an hour and a half. I brought a set of books to the classes. The library had many copies circulating, but students had to check out their own copies. The copies I brought were checked out in my name and I needed them for use with other classes. Some classes had lessons on both authors while some had lessons on only one. I worked with learners in GED, pre-GED, and multi-level ABE classes. Most students were fluent speakers of English and a majority were African-American or Afro-Caribbean. Both men and women, aged 18 to 60-plus, participated. Some but not all of the learners came to the actual readings.

The two authors invited were Lucy Jane Bledsoe and hattie gossett. (She prefers the lower-case spelling of her name.) Bledsoe teaches writing to adult new learners in California. Her book, *Working Parts* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1997), tells the story of Lori Taylor, a bike mechanic with a reading problem who is clearly attracted to women—as of the second page she is cruising the librarian in her town. Hattie gossett's poetry has been in print for over ten years. Her snapshots of urban life, her jazzy rhythms, and her observations from the perspective of tenant, waitress, Harlem resident, are funny and familiar. Both gossett and Bledsoe write about topics of interest to learners. Their writing is accessible and both can establish rapport with adult basic education students quite effectively.

Both authors also break taboos. Gossett, in her writing, observes none of the taboos against four-letter words and slang body parts that much print adheres to (most ABE texts in particular). Bledsoe's portrayal of Lori Taylor as a lesbian is forthright. When I brought these books to adult literacy classes, I was constantly on edge. Some adult learners are religious and object to four-letter words. Similarly, I knew some students might feel that homosexuality is wrong and therefore the book should not be part of the curriculum. I was nervous, waiting for a student to put the book down, to refuse to read on, to tell me how inappropriate these texts were and how she couldn't continue because her religious beliefs wouldn't allow it.

From my perspective, the texts presented different kinds of risk. My expectations of what would be problematic were very different for the two books. For example, I imagined that Lucy's book might prompt students to make derogatory comments about gays and lesbians. Would I then come out? Would I be brave enough to challenge such comments? The risk is so much greater when the material hits close to home. With hattie's book my fears were related to being embarrassed or being uncool, rather than to a sense of personal vulnerability.

If I'd invented these uncomfortable scenarios months before scheduling the class visits, I might have invited different authors. But happily, such scenes never occurred. Instead, I deem the lessons some of the most successful I ever taught. I count the lessons as wildly successful not only because they generated attendance at the readings, but because learners were genuinely interested in continuing to read the books. The hardest part was not getting through the reading but rather taking the books away at the end. What was it that led to such positive results?

What I Did

When I taught both books I began by explaining a bit about what a reading is. For students who had never been to one, I was worried they would imagine that they would be called on to read. So I explained that the author had to do all the work. They could ask questions, but no one would put them on the spot. I also used going to a party for someone you don't know very well as a metaphor. How would you feel if I invited you to my friend Millie's party? You might feel a little awkward or even anxious.

You don't know Millie, you might not know anyone there. Well, a reading is like a party for an author and I might not want to go either if I didn't know the author at all. So the purpose of my workshop was to introduce students to the author. Since the authors themselves were out of state until the day of the reading, I would make the introduction through the book.

With both books, we spent a long time on the front cover and with *Working Parts* we also read the back cover. *Working Parts*' covers are perfect for a predicting activity. The picture and the title are a little ambiguous. What kinds of things come to mind when you hear the words "working parts"? The students brainstormed: bikes, can openers, cars, our bodies. The cover has a picture of a bike but also a headless, nude human figure. The class generally reached consensus that the figure was a woman. There are also some handwritten cursive words fading into the background. We talked some about that: maybe it's a letter or a journal. How do we know that? Because it's not typewritten. It doesn't have anything that makes it look legal or like an inter-office memo, say with an official stationery heading or a "To:" and "From:" header.

The hardest part was not getting through the reading but rather taking the books away at the end.

Going over the back cover of *Working Parts* turned out to be the most strenuous reading. In six sentences the themes and the plot are discussed, the characters introduced. It's dense, with phrases like "they negotiate the rough ride of personal growth" and "dangerous emotional territory." The banner reads: "A story of personal revolution"—what does that *mean*? "Dangerous emotional territory" is my favorite phrase to explain because students recognize the boundaries of this territory intuitively. If someone crosses the line into dangerous emotional territory, it's common to say, "You don't even want to go there." After rereading this paragraph, I asked students to work in pairs to make a list of five facts that they already knew about the book and five questions they had that they hoped to learn the answers to. With some initial prompting everyone got at least a couple in each category. When some students got the hang of it, they just kept going and going. For example, facts were: The story is about a bike mechanic. She can't read. Questions included: Why can't she read? Why did she drop out of high school? What is the dangerous emotional territory? Who taught her how to fix bicycles? One or two of the students read ahead, noticing on the back cover that Bledsoe is called "an intelligent, deeply perceptive lesbian voice for the 90s." They generated questions from this information, which was fine. If they mentioned it at all explicitly, it was to me quietly. I affirmed that they were right, but downplayed it—saying that we would get to that.

In each class I made a long list of many of the facts and questions. Learners shouted theirs out and, particularly when we got to their questions, I couldn't keep up. Chuckling, they appeared tickled to be so far ahead of me. This moment was pivotal; they began having a relationship with the book that wasn't dependent on me.

I read aloud the first few paragraphs and then we talked about the setting—a public library. Lori has a flashback to her days in high school and this is when we talk about all the senses that Bledsoe appeals to in her writing. What does it sound like in high school? What does it smell like? Together we read a little more aloud—just until Lori winks at the librarian and Lori lets us know, "Women and machinery were my specialties." In every class this got some reaction. Some students were quick to conclude that Lori must be a lesbian. Of course they didn't say this aloud. "She's a...you know," was often as close as they got, even when I encouraged them, "Yeah, you're right. Say it." Once I said "lesbian" aloud, it freed them to say the word. Others remembered that she was in the library because of Mickey and *his* grin, "the one that showed he loved me, the one that made me love him, the reason I came in the first place" (p.4). They inferred that she was bisexual. For most students, this new information seemed to build their interest in the book. They began reading immediately, getting absorbed in the book and staying that way, their eyes moving from one side of the page to another.

In most classes (ABE 2 level), I told students to read silently for about 10 minutes, but, more often than not, it became 20 minutes. It was interesting to see that students were engaged enough to keep going. I feel lazy when students are reading independently, but reading silently is the kind of practice many of them need, especially since their reading rates are relatively slow. I reread the chapter and watched their eyes move across the page.

I took a different tack when introducing hattie gossett's *Presenting...Sister No Blues* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988). We talked about the front cover briefly: a woman dressed in African jewelry and dreds with her mouth open, her finger pointed. Next we perused the table of contents. Actually, I asked a student to read aloud the section headings. I didn't volunteer myself or anyone else to read the names of every poem. But as we looked over the page and discussed the kind of poems that might be in each section, students inevitably noticed the hot-button words; for example, the introduc-

tion is entitled "born into this life the child of houseniggahs" and in the third section, there is a poem called "colored pussy." In a few classes one student noticed and pointed it out to others. If I felt the tenor of the class was about to dissolve into middle school giggle fits, I'd remind everyone we were grownups and that we could handle this. As in middle school classes, saying the words aloud dissipates the tension.

Before actually looking at the book of poetry, I'd mention the similarities between poetry and music. People think poetry is like novels or biographies. It comes between covers in a book. It's written with letters, but it has a lot more in common with music. "What kind of music do you listen to? What do you listen to music for?" I'd ask. And I heard the range. Students said, "I listen to gospel, R&B, jazz, country. I listen to set a mood, to relax, for the beat, for the words, for the message." These are all the ways you can listen to poetry. Maybe the message isn't clear to you right away, but you can listen for the beat. Maybe some of the words sound good to your ears. And there's one more way to enter into a poem. It doesn't generally work with prose or music. With a poem you can look at the picture it makes on the page. Some poets are so careful, like artists, about where they put the marks. Pay attention to what these might mean.

By the time we turned to the first poem I wanted to read with the group, I could say, listen for the rhythm. This poem is part of a series called "the subway poems." In music if you want to express something that moves fast, you can speed up the way the instruments play, but how can you do that with words? Watch for that as I read to you. The subway poems belong to the section called "just a hit or 2/sketches & polaroids from everyday." It's a poem anyone who takes public transportation in the city can relate to, especially anyone who has ridden when kids are just out of school and their voices and conversation echo up and down the platform.

We discussed the rhythm, look and message of the poem. Some lines are long, some are short. Some words are mooshed together, the "yellowredorange bell pepper," for example, that the kids are bouncing up and down the platform. So the words are a blur, like the pepper. Then I asked participants to choose a word or a phrase that they liked the best. Then we read those aloud in turn, with no break, basically composing a different poem from the words on the page. This activity, called text-rendering, worked well in some classes, not so well in others. But all of these activities set the stage for making poetry a social experience. In the next segment of the class, I invited students to read a poem or poems of their choosing. They could flip through the book, look back at the table of contents, they could stop in the middle and start a new one—whatever. But by the end of the time, they had to have a line that they liked to share with others and a reason why they liked that line. Everyone found something to share. Most times, after we read some of the poem aloud, the student gave a short synopsis, read the line, and either asked a question about what it meant or made a connection to his or her own life. For example, the poem "soul looks back in wonder" describes Caribbean women. It was a top choice, reminding students of their home countries. The poem "dear landlord" was another popular choice, with students laughing appreciatively when the tenant withheld the rent because it was raining in her apartment.

After reading and discussing, I asked students to brainstorm questions they might want to ask the author. Then I collected my books. The big surprise for me was when students asked if they could keep the books. Yes, magazine articles and newspaper clippings absolutely have an up-to-the-minute relevance that a novel or poetry can't compete with, but in all the years I've taught with that type of material, learners have never swamped me asking for more. Sure, one or two students might be captivated or convinced, but not to this degree.

Why Did It Work?

What kept students engaged? What advice can I offer to others? I have a few theories. The first is that literature which breaks taboos is a draw. Much of the motivation for reading comes from curiosity. Taboos fuel curiosity. Text that breaks taboos gives us a peephole into a forbidden world, the way Bledsoe's writing about Lori Taylor gave straight students a window into one lesbian's world. Taboo language can add a surprise, especially for new readers who are hesitating over words. The shock of finding a swear word can turn to delight at finding such a coarse word in a challenging selection. This reward encourages persistence in reading.

Recommending texts with street language or with explicit gay or lesbian content or characters opens difficult questions for teachers. Where do we draw the line? In the wake of the Clinton/Lewinsky/Starr scandal, many of us have found public discourse breaking so many taboos that we would prefer to reinstate them rather than break some more. If pornography engages students in reading, do we bring that in too? Besides entertaining extreme questions like this, in adult education we need to ask ourselves why the commercially available short story collections and anthologies of longer work are "clean" versions. What makes a taboo and whom does it protect?

I set a tone that downplayed the taboo subjects. Instead of using the subject matter to shock students or to sensationalize the class, I pretty much waited for them to get it. They made their own discoveries. Then I left some space for people to deal with the intensity privately. I didn't dwell on lesbianism, asking "What do you think? What are synonyms for…? Have you ever…?" I began to see this situation as very loaded. Many times it's difficult, especially for young adults, but often for older adults as

well, to express curiosity about lesbian and gay issues without getting labeled. Whereas students might have the inclination to be open-minded or at least curious, even in classroom situations they might be hesitant to reveal that for fear of being called names themselves. Letting the topic be just part of a landscape enabled students to read on and to learn about the feelings, perspectives, and world of a lesbian without so much risk. One character in a novel isn't terribly threatening.

In one ABE class with a wide range of levels, students began identifying with Lori right away. They agreed with their teacher: she's like me, she's smart and she can't read; or she's good with her hands but she can't read; or she's good with people but she can't read. It was more difficult in this class when students found out Lori specializes in women. A student verbalized her negative feelings about homosexuality when she got to this line. I said, does that change how you feel about Lori? She said, "a little." Looking back I realize that I luckily asked the right question. I didn't say, "How do you feel about reading the book?" because then I might have learned that she didn't want to read it anymore. I was surprised and pleased that even though her personal views were strong, she could still maintain some openness toward the character.

In spite of the fact that the books were unusual texts for literacy classrooms, what I asked students to do was very familiar. We did tons of pre-reading and I asked obvious questions and listened to their answers. There was nothing threatening in these pre-reading activities. In fact, for some they were a little boring. I offered a context that is recognizably school-like. Perhaps this allowed students to accept very untraditional texts.

Some teachers shy away from topics that are touchy because they are worried about how to handle them. Once I realized that I was dealing with risky/risqué texts, I had no choice but to live up to the situation. I modeled handling the words "lesbian," "niggah," "pussy" forthrightly. Maybe I blushed a little, but I provided a counterbalance to the nervous giggling. Even when we ask students what they want to learn about, I wonder if this question is so open as it seems. In my experience, students wanted to read a story about a lesbian bike mechanic with a reading problem.

Books themselves turned out to be a drawing card. Part of the explanation has to lie in the pacing. Short stories and magazine or newspaper articles peak. They come to closure, wrapping up their points. There really isn't an appeal to the reader—come along for the ride—enticing one to read just a little bit more. While poetry doesn't work in the same way novels do, hattie gossett's poems do group together in series like the subway poems or "butter #1, butter #2, 3, and 4." Further, with her poetry, I had the distinct feeling that the author kept students wanting more. By the end of class, they knew they could handle the material on their own. My sense was that they had confidence that they could read on their own and that it would be rewarding. Any well chosen whole book could heighten students' interest in reading.

I traveled with a set of ten books, but at times I taught classes with twice as many people. I felt awful when I taught hattie's poetry to larger classes or combined groups, because I never had enough books to go around. Looking back I realize that these were the classes with the highest energy level. Sharing a book, deciding what to read first and second, reading aloud together in a pair before reading to the group, these all added to the social experience of poetry. Although reading can be a solitary experience, many people derive enjoyment from talking about what they are reading. In the classroom discussions about

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reading often have an instructional agenda. A discussion for the purposes of building comprehension has a different flavor. Both are important. Students can benefit from both.

Another variable I had working in my favor was that I was a one-time teacher. Maybe students were more indulgent and more willing to be flexible, perhaps because they knew I was a special guest. The next class or the next hour would be a return to the usual curriculum. As the primary text, *Working Parts* might have bored students whose interests lay in spy novels, murder mysteries, or science fiction. As a textbook, *Presenting...Sister No Blues* would have faced strong resistance from students who see texts with street language as a waste of their school time. As one student said, "We know street language already."

The obstacles I've listed sound daunting, but the pay-off makes facing them worthwhile. As a literacy teacher, it is certainly gratifying to see students forming their own questions, reading silently and laughing because they appreciate the humor. Apart from the pay-off in reading interest, breaking taboos can have an additional benefit. Teachers have the opportunity to model risk-taking and, in doing so, to create a dynamic of equality within the classroom. Much of the time teachers ask students to take risks while we stay in our zone of comfort, teaching from our strengths. A true risk brings about personal growth. Is it right to "subject" students to a process which might be very personal? Making students a party to this kind of risk is a delicate decision. I take this question very seriously and use as my guide a saying I've heard in storytelling circles. "If your audience cries when you tell a story, they should pay you, but if you cry when your tell your story, you should pay them." If the answer to the question "Who grows from this risk?" is "Everyone," then I'd encourage it. Of course, if the answer is, "Me, the teacher," then the classroom is not the ideal place to take this risk.

I felt awful when I taught hattie's poetry to larger classes or combined groups, because I never had enough books to go around. Looking back I realize that these were the classes with the highest energy level.

I must acknowledge many people who had a hand in the success of this venture. Boston Public Librarians Priscilla Howell and Ellen Graf arranged for the programs. The students and teachers who took risks with me deserve special mention. They co-create classrooms where an openness to new learning experiences is a given. Yet I give the largest chunk of credit to the authors. Both women know how to write! But I don't want to leave the impression that this approach could only work in Boston with these books. In every one of the 16 situations, some activities worked and some didn't. But the main thing was, even if I didn't connect with the group, even if they thought the activities were childish, even if they were frustrated by the pace of class at the beginning, the texts spoke to them. I highly recommend the use of these books in the classroom. I highly recommend taking a risk. Break a taboo! And strategize with other program staff at your center about how you can supply books students can keep! •

Just Listen...

by
Adam Ross

When I think of experiential learning, I think about a conversation I had last spring with my younger sister. She works in Special Education with the deaf and this conversation spurred me to use an excerpt from a book about Helen Keller. At the time I was having a hard time getting my GED and pre-GED students started writing. I remember the weather was so nice last spring that I wanted to get my students outside. I hoped that, if we went out, they would get inspired.

When I make up lessons, I'm usually trying to hit more than one subject. Here, I wanted to include social studies as well as language arts. So I found a reading selection on Helen Keller and some comprehension questions. I think the excerpt I used came from a U.S. history text. After we read, we talked about how different the world would be if we lived as Keller had, with no sound or sight. Some students asked why she didn't have laser surgery or animal eye replacements. Those comments helped us relate Helen Keller's situation to the period of time she lived in. Keller's story is a great way to point out the advances in medicine and technology. For me, her story is amazing because she lived at a time when there wasn't much available for her educationally. Students with disabilities then did not have the resources that are becoming available for students today, yet she

overcame her obstacles and became a hero. Educational opportunities for the disabled have changed dramatically in the last 100 years.

After the discussion, I led the group outside. Our community center is next door to an elementary school. The buildings share a common concrete playground near busy Washington Street in the South End. The students all picked different places to sit outside. First I asked students to block out all they could hear by thinking of something else. We did that for about fifteen minutes. Then I asked them to close their eyes and just listen. I asked them to pay attention to what they heard. After about fifteen minutes, I asked them to open their eyes and think about what they noticed. We spent about fifteen minutes just observing and then headed back to the classroom. On our way to the class I started asking the students questions about what we just did, and the conversation continued in the classroom. My questions to prompt thoughful discussion were:

I think it's important to talk about issues that make people uncomfortable.

- What did you hear?
- What did you think about while listening?
- Once you opened your eyes, what did you see?
- Did you see things that you couldn't hear?
- Did you hear things that you couldn't see?
- Did you imagine a sound to be one thing and then realize that it was actually from something different?

Once students started sharing what they had noticed, I shared my experience as well. It was interesting to find that many of us heard things that many others of us did not notice. When students said that they noticed the same things, I asked more specific questions to generate more involved and exploratory thinking. A few students said they heard kids playing, so I asked them what sounds they heard that enabled them to distinguish that there were kids playing. This is when the students' answers got much more diverse and the conversation became more interesting. Some students said they heard high-pitched yells and shouts, others said they heard a baseball being hit, and others said they heard people running very fast. Some students said they heard car engines, others heard the brakes of a bus, and I offered that I had heard a manhole cover get run over. All these details led the students to the same discoveries, but each one heard unique, detailed sounds.

After returning to the classroom, students spent some time writing. Overall, I was pleased with their essays. Although I want to have peer editing happen and I try to relate writing skills and grammar to their own writing, sometimes what they produce is so short, it makes it hard. If there are only four lines, you might not see the particular grammar point we just studied. On this day, the writing had an experiential quality. They got to experience something directly and then write about it. And because of the discussions, their writing was more pre-meditated. They had more to say, and that meant we had more to work with.

If I were going to do the lesson again, I would organize it a bit better. I didn't write down the lesson beforehand or make my exact objectives clear. I'd like to make clearer connections to other things we're studying. For example, Ann Sullivan, Keller's tutor, had her own story of emigrating from Ireland. There were class differences between Keller and Sullivan that would have been interesting to explore since we had touched on those topics before. I think it's important to talk about issues that make people uncomfortable. We talk about race and other loaded issues, so I wasn't afraid to bring up disabilities. I did worry that maybe I didn't have enough background on the Americans with Disabilities Act, but I went ahead.

I'm not sure how much more I could extend this lesson. A couple of students were pretty interested. Before the class a few students had some idea that Helen Keller was a blind woman. They had heard of her through some stupid jokes, but that was it. After reading, they were impressed. Some said they had more respect for people with disabilities. I remember one student mentioned that his uncle was either blind or deaf. (I forget which.) This student was one of the people who could communicate with his uncle pretty well. I remember he said in his writing that before he had viewed his uncle as normal, but that he came to see him as extraordinary.

So the lesson had many positive outcomes: It stimulated thinking about disabilities, it got students to write more descriptively and powerfully, and it gave us a way to talk about some changes that had taken place in the past 100 years. Talking about the lesson makes me want to do it again soon! •

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Discourse & Change: Working Through Domestic Violence With Learners

by
Anson Green

Adult education has experienced many changes in the last few years. Welfare reform has greatly influenced our field, placing a larger emphasis on objective accountability and encouraging a growing trend toward vocationalism. Programs that serve recipients of public assistance have experienced significant changes; students have less time to spend in education but often come in with greater needs, many beyond quick, purely academic remediation. Educators realize that meeting these demands does not necessarily mean we need to "teach the GED better" but rather to be more creative in addressing these needs by incorporating curricula and themes that focus on human capital characteristics such as self-concept, safety, and health. Because these changes affect women in particular, welfare reform has stimulated, in part, a growing interest in addressing employment barriers that are unique to women, especially encouraging greater reflection on how much domestic violence and abuse shapes the world of many learners. In the past year, this interest has manifested itself in, among other things, a spirited, often heated debate on the National Literacy Advocacy listserv on the appropriateness of introducing issues related to violence into the adult education classroom, the creation of a national listserv dedicated to issues related to women and literacy, and an international conference on these topics held in

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Atlanta last February.

For me the increased demands created by welfare reform have refined my definition of what adult literacy is and have broadened the scope of what I hope the women will achieve in my Welfare-to-Work/GED class. In the past, I measured literacy gains simply by the numbers: GED scores and grade level gains on standardized tests. My perspective changed when Texas began implementing its own version of welfare reform; my class experienced a significant drop in the number of referrals received as well as a slight change in the type of students coming in. In the past, I received as referrals a wide variety of students who qualified for our program. Now, because their barriers to immediate employment may be less severe, many of these students are sent directly to work, and I get many students who belong to what the welfare system refers to as the "hardest to serve." These students are not necessarily women with lower academic aptitude, as many of our welfare case managers think, but rather women who have not finished their education or who have been unsuccessful in finding or holding a job because of obstacles outside of the classroom or workplace.

Many times the barriers these women face are related to past or present violence in their lives. For many, remaining focused for a productive day in class or at the testing center is impossible because their lives are severly obscured by violence. I realized that I needed to shift from providing language and basic skills simply for the sake of better test scores to striving to find ways to facilitate learning that encouraged students to make more informed choices and changes in their lives, so that their lives might become not only more satisfying and rewarding in terms of family and work, but also safer.

This article will explain how I made this move from providing traditional academic instruction geared toward the GED exam to addressing the "silent spaces" in women's lives, namely the overwhelming need to work through abuse and family violence. Recently, Sapphire's novel *Push* as well as a student-generated life-skills curriculum project called La COCINA de Vida (The Kitchen of Life) have been used to facilitate exploration of these topics, as well as to continue meeting our day-to-day needs of addressing the critical reading and writing skills needed for the GED.

Our Class

I work in a GED class in west San Antonio, Texas, that is part of a Welfare-to-Work program designed for women receiving TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) benefits. We meet twenty-five hours a week in a classroom situated in an unemployment office. Women in our program typically range in age from their late teens to early thirties and are primarily Hispanic. Students bring a variety of histories to class. Some have suffered extreme hardships and almost insurmountable obstacles related to abusive relationships, poverty, and sometimes jail, drugs, and gangs. These students often enter isolated, somewhat demoralized and understandably despondent. They have a clearer vision of where they've been rather than where they are going. Others in class have not had it so bad. Some have stronger family support and have had opportunities offered which, for a variety of reasons, have simply not materialized. Their time in our class is much more transient, as they often enter with a more focused view of where they are going.

I came into the class three years ago after teaching for two years while in graduate school in the Classics Department at Florida State University. My middle-class background, education in the humanities and experience teaching only college students meant that there were stark differences between my new students and myself and that I needed to be educated by them in order to be effective in the classroom.

Since I began teaching here, the class has been punctuated by difficulties related to the differences among us, but for the most part our differences have created more varied and fruitful learning. I attribute much of the success we have had balancing out our disparate personalities and backgrounds to a comfortable, trusting classroom environment which I work hard to foster. Everyone

usually respects each other and everyone's opinions are valued. Strong bonds are built within the class, and I feel this is in part due to the value placed on life experience. In this safe environment, learners feel at ease opening up and revealing aspects of themselves that they have shared with few people.[1]

Violence: The "Normal" World for Many Women on Public Assistance

A recent study at the University of Michigan states that up to 65% of all welfare recipients report they are or have been in abusive relationships in the past year. Of those reporting domestic abuse, just under 75% have also had experience with sexual trauma (Raphael & Tolman, p.12). Domestic violence is thus an overwhelming factor in the lives of a high percentage of women receiving public assistance. As the study indicates, women are highly unlikely to self-identify on domestic abuse to their welfare case managers, fearing loss of their children to child protective services or becoming ineligible for welfare benefits (Raphael & Tolman, p.35). Because of these dire constraints, many women affected by domestic violence may not feel safe to self-identify and thus these numbers may be much higher. Researchers in the adult literacy field who study violence among learners in great detail hold that violence is much more pervasive, edging closer to one hundred percent in some cases. Thus, facing violence is a "normal" way of life for many adult learners.[2]

With numbers like these, domestic violence, and the overwhelming effect it has on daily life—going to school, taking care of children, looking for work—should be one of the greatest concerns for educators and welfare department workers. Much of the attrition many programs suffer and the "poor progress" students show when measured solely by objective testing can be attributed to the overwhelming presence violence has in learners' lives. With free counseling services at a premium, women returning to school often find the nurturing environment of the classroom a place where they can discuss issues related to violence with friends and perhaps the class at large.

Adult educators can prove to be a pivotal hinge in the recovery process for learners suffering with domestic trauma, and indeed for many students trauma is so great that learning cannot begin until there is psychological healing (Wolpow & Askov, p.53). Trauma can severely impact students' performance; thus educators should be attuned and sensitive observers to students' needs beyond simply addressing reading and writing competencies. In addition, with welfare reform placing such a demand on women to move from our programs into work, curricula and teaching strategies geared toward academic remediation alone may be inadequate in assisting women in gaining self-sufficiency when learners' barriers are related to domestic abuse (Raphael & Tolman, p.33).

In order to meet the critical needs of our learners, in addition to the growing demands created by welfare reform, the impact of violence must be better addressed in literacy programs. If not, there is a cost to learners, literacy workers and programs as a whole as we struggle, and often fall short, in meeting the needs placed on us by adult learners whose lives may be overwhelmed by violence and trauma (Horsman, p.1).

Working Through Violence in the Adult Education Classroom: Sapphire's "Push"

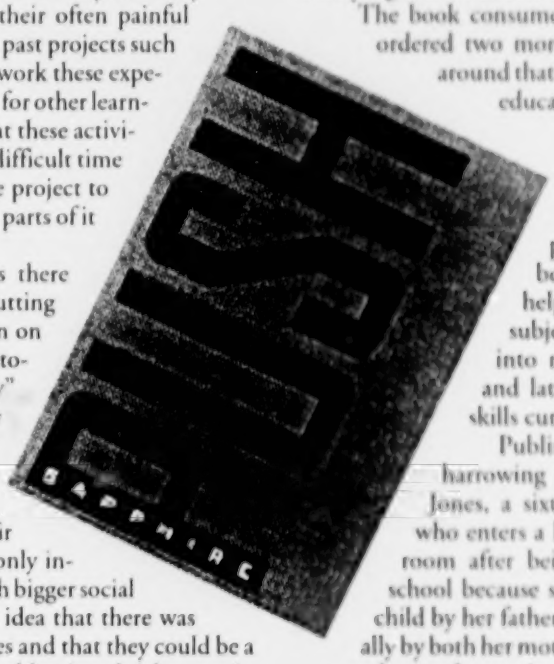
Last August I started our school year with a rough outline of how to better address family violence in the classroom; I knew bringing students to the center of planning and discussion was of vital importance. I had written a proposal for a grant to explore these topics in class by creating a "curriculum" with students based around student-identified employability barriers and was hoping to have the opportunity to work on the topic of violence with students in greater detail.

The issues of domestic violence and abuse were not new topics in our class. In the past, student stories recounting abuse had moved from being a topic during lunch or outside during a cigarette break to finding a voice in print, both on our class web-page and also in a book of student stories produced last year as part of a project-based learning activity. Last year, students even took their stories from the classroom to a local middle school in presentations they made to the student body on violence, gangs and drugs.[3] Past discussions on violence were always a mix of anger, confusion, fear and sometimes relief that "those days were over." There had been a good deal of quality, often revealing, writing going on, but more and more I felt a need to be able to move our work beyond recounting the experiences to exploring how students could more objectively examine the factors at work behind family violence. This year I wanted to continue this tradition and move the energy these topics create in class into a curriculum project where students could better problematize the issue of violence and create positive "next steps" to the issue.

We were given the opportunity to explore this in greater detail in the fall with the award of a mini-grant from the Texas Education Agency. The grant supported the development of a series of student-generated life skills curriculum units focused on workplace transition. In my grant proposal, I had stressed that the project would begin using student accounts of past experiences at work, especially examining the variety of complicated intrinsic and extrinsic barriers learners face when going to work. I was certain that domestic violence would factor largely into the themes; I was less certain how to effectively create a forum where these issues could be "depersonalized" to an extent that they could be closely and objectively explored by students. Because these were their own

stories, I had a difficult time in the past taking the topic of domestic violence out of this personalized context.

With the award of the grant, I all of a sudden found myself in a position of having to get students to buy into the idea of working on a large project that would benefit others. I was immediately worried that they wouldn't be interested and I would be stuck with a student-generated curriculum that students didn't want to "generate." I also had doubts about my ability to engage students with the topic of domestic violence in such a way that they would not only write down their often painful experiences, as we had done in past projects such as our class webpage, but also work these experiences into guidance activities for other learners. I had a general idea of what these activities might look like and had a difficult time explaining my "vision" for the project to students, mainly because large parts of it were still undefined.



I knew that for students there would be a big leap from putting their painful experiences down on paper and taking those same stories and making an "activity" around them for others. I knew that to get things going I would need to create a sense of altruism within the group and foster the idea that their painful experiences were not only individual, but also part of a much bigger social ill. I needed to encourage the idea that there was "value" in their past experiences and that they could be a crucial part of a project that would assist other learners in working through violence. An objective atmosphere was needed where students could view their own experiences in a larger framework, where their stories were part of a larger story, rather than simply isolated experiences with no "value" to others.

By chance, the key to gaining a more objective perspective on the subject lay in our class reading of Sapphire's novel *Push*.[4] At the beginning of the school year students suggested that we not buy new GED textbooks but rather books that students really wanted to read. I told my coordinator and she agreed to provide us with a purchase order to get books at a local bookstore. I took the class to the bookstore and they selected books on child-rearing, pregnancy, rape and domestic violence. In addition, we picked up several books of poetry by authors such as the musician Jewel and Maya Angelou, along with fiction by Sandra Cisneros and Alice Walker. We also picked up a book I had just read about in a review in the journal *Adult Basic Education*. The book was *Push*, by an author unknown to me, Sapphire.

Push is the first novel by performance poet and former Harlem adult educator Sapphire (Ramona Lofton). The story is as engaging and, at times, horrifying as it is controversial and educational. It is a telling account of just how much adult educators can affect learners' lives and a stunning criticism of welfare reform. Though the story's content is graphic and the language objectionable to some, it has been distributed in programs as professional development reading, used by some educators in the adult education classroom and even used in a Canadian program for at-risk teens.

The book consumed my class so much that we ordered two more copies and when word got around that we were reading it in class, two educators donated two more copies. Two students were so taken with the book that they ordered copies online—no mean feat for women on tight, public assistance budgets. *Push* became a significant catalyst in helping the students frame the subject of abuse and violence first into reflective stories on the book and later into activities for our life-skills curriculum.

Published in 1996, *Push* presents the harrowing story of Claireece "Precious" Jones, a sixteen year-old literacy student who enters a Harlem adult education classroom after being forced to leave her high school because she is pregnant with a second child by her father. She is viciously abused sexually by both her mother and her father and ignored and passed over in a previous school where her teachers are instructed by their principal to "focus on the ones who can learn" (Sapphire, p.37). Precious enters a Harlem pre-G.E.D. class without the literacy skills needed to even tell time or read a street sign. Once in class, though, she finds comfort and a new, more hopeful horizon by learning to read and to better read the world around her. She begins to grasp the realities of her own past victimization, both within her family and by the school system that failed her, and finds viable ways to begin making real change in her life and that of her newborn child. She begins obtaining access to information which helps her to be a more successful mother and to break the chain of illiteracy with her newborn. Precious begins to receive her own welfare benefits, which her mother has been collecting, enters a halfway house, thus escaping the darkly oppressive world dominated by her mother, and begins attending a support group for incest survivors.

Undoubtedly, our success using such a difficult text and opening the classroom up to more probing issues lay in the fact that students shared in the decision-making

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over reading the novel. When I began using *Push*, I consciously began choosing "safe" sections of the novel that I felt students would enjoy and that would act as catalysts for student writing. Through creative cutting and pasting, I provided students with a section of the novel that recounts Precious' first day going to her pre-GED class. It's a very realistic, often humorous scene. Students loved the reading and it acted as a good trigger for students to write about their own experiences and fears returning to school. Emboldened by the success, I began to search for other sections students would enjoy. After reading aloud short sections of the book that I felt might be of interest to students, we spent a week working on writing assignments around these "safe" themes in the book. Still, I found it difficult ignoring some of the more explicit and probing areas in the book and was compelled to start incorporating more challenging sections.

The decision to read some of the more explicit sections of the book was driven by a student who picked up the book on my desk and began reading it during lunch. She ran across one of the sections we had not gone over and jokingly accused me of "censoring" it. We began talking as a class about this material and the students responded that they were very interested in reading it. Some commented that it sounded like something they could really relate to. Experience stories, often very revealing, are a large part of our curriculum, but, oddly enough, I had drawn a line between the fictional experiences of the character Precious Jones and the students' own real-life experiences, which in many ways were often no different. I sensed that many felt I had let them down by not trusting their sensibilities when, in fact, I was insecure about my own comfort level with the material. The validation of their voice allowed us to work through the differences in our perceptions and interpretations of the material and was an educating and empowering experience for all.

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It should be noted that no one was forced to read the book or participate in the class discussions of it. Students who wished not to participate in the reading were allowed to work on other activities. While most students eagerly read the book, one student chose not to participate because the material was too graphic. In her journal she wrote, "After [I have my baby], I'm going to try and read this book. For right now, I'll have to pass." This freedom to "step out" and pursue another activity was one several students took at different times. Validating their personal choice and level of comfort with the material was a major factor in the success of using the book in class.

As we progressed through the story, the more explicit, sometimes horrifyingly surreal sections, which dominate earlier sections of the book, began to "make sense" as students were able to place the horror in the larger context of Precious' triumphs—going back to school, moving away from her oppressive mother, learning to read, bonding with classmates for support, seeking counseling. These were steps many of my students had taken or were still working toward. After particularly intense sections of the book, we would usually shift into talking about a more humorous section, of which there are many. Talk on a lighter section would lead to laughter. Tension was broken and usually we would be pulled back into talking about the more exposing material. This is where students began to make comparisons with their own experiences to the group, often comparing themselves with Precious, treating her as if she were a real person. The advice they wanted to give Precious often led to a greater awareness of their own situations. Often comments like, "Hey, that's what happened to me.... Now I see why...." were common. *Push* not only generated conversations about abuse, but led to classroom discussion and often further work on parenting, racism, drugs, lesbianism and even prenatal care. Because their choice was validated when deciding whether to tackle this novel, students felt they had a real stake in the activity. This validation of student choice and full engagement in the learning process later proved to be a vital factor in our success working through the subject of domestic violence in our curriculum project.

Occasionally issues moved beyond my purview and students needed professional advice. Last year, with the help of a case manager, I was able to locate a therapist who would visit our class once a month to provide group-counseling services free of charge. Her office contacts me a week before she comes to do an up-front needs assessment, asking what "stressors" may be brewing in class discussion. I tell them, and then Laura, the counselor, arrives with directed advice and useful resources for the

students. Laura has proven to be an indispensable resource for the class. Knowing I had this underpinning of professional advice to fall back on, I was better able to tackle the complicated areas of the book and felt more directed and informed when using them as themes for learning.

With Laura as a referral resource, students have been able to draw on painful experiences related to violence and abuse and recount them in print. This approach is supported by psychological practice that often uses writing as a key element to recovery. With the assistance of professional therapists, instructors can play an important role as guides to help students shape their experiences and support their decision "to attach words to their 'unspeakable' memories" (Wolpow & Askov, p.51). Laura sees several of my students weekly, some with their children, and even sends a van to pick them up for private counseling. The resource is invaluable.

Push encouraged classroom discourse on difficult subjects in class. It qualified students' life experiences, many of which had been silenced, and acted as a rich catalyst for student writing, especially writing about past and present family violence.

La COCINA de Vida

As we were reading *Push* in class, I was told that we had received the grant award for our curriculum project. We spent the next afternoon discussing the project. It meant that we would be getting a new computer, scanner and printer, travel money for students to attend conferences and the opportunity to take their experiences out of the classroom and into other classes through the development of curriculum lessons. I explained the objectives of the project and we began to discuss where they thought we might start. Because we are a Welfare-to-Work class, transition to work is a major focus, but we have always been plagued with poor materials to prepare for this transition. Lessons on building the perfect résumé, dressing for success and employer expectations seemed to address few of the real barriers women had going to work. Fired up by our recent reading of *Push*, students had already gained a broader perspective on the issue of violence and how it affected school and work. They had their own past experiences and had done a good deal of reflection working through these in the more objective context of *Push*. Our reading had made them more informed "experts" on the topic, using their first-hand experiences and examining them in light of the events that occur in the world of *Push*. It strongly shaped the themes students identified as major impediments to their transition into work, namely, abuse, violence, and welfare stereotypes. It simplified addressing these challenging issues, especially domestic violence, and acted as a strong catalyst to frame discussions and classwork around.

We put our ideas together and then put them into activities using an inquiry approach to theme development, beginning with learners' stories about past work experience. Sometimes we would share these stories orally; sometimes there would be an anonymously written account provided by a student. By either looking closely at an individual account or a related group of stories, we would then tease the account apart, examining what happened in the situation and discussing the alternatives and choices available to the student at the time. We would then research the topic further on the Internet,

in many of the books we had recently purchased and using various outside resources. While working on domestic violence, for instance, students would bring in newspaper articles or materials some had gathered while visiting our local women's shelters in the past. Students named the project La COCINA de Vida (The Kitchen of Life), symbolizing the wide variety of "ingredients" sometimes needed in life to make the transition from public assistance to self-sufficiency. To date, it includes units addressing sexual harassment, domestic violence, and welfare stereotypes and a unit on sorting out general barriers such as child care difficulties and working around poor family support.

My role in the project has been that of a facilitator of ideas and shaper of curriculum lessons. I have been careful to stay in this role, being very concerned with the need for unforced student involvement and aiming to foster greater self-actualization and ownership over the project. Because learners are generating lesson content through their experiences and I am assisting them in framing this content into activities, I have high hopes that we will be able to address areas that other curricula and frameworks tend to marginalize.

To an extent, the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has provided me with a road map to give our work direction. Throughout the project I've adapted a Freirean approach, striving to always link our reading and writing activities to personal and community awareness and change. In the purest Freirean sense, students read the "word" so that they can better read their "world" (Freire and Macedo, p.87). La COCINA activities encourage participants to develop basic skills (the word) so they can better interpret the circumstances governing their lives (the world). In addition, Freire stresses the importance emotions play in personal transformation. Students have strong personal feelings over past experiences with work—anger, anxiety, and fear, mixed with hope and joy. By bringing these to the surface, we strive not only to break through the protective "attitude" of some learners, but also to overcome feelings of powerlessness and the sense that "nothing can be done" which overwhelm many others. Though lacking a strong emphasis on political radicalism, La COCINA stresses the Freirean "need to 'empower' disenfranchised learners to fight the status quo and help create a more fair and equitable society through a process of critical reflection and collective action" (Wrigley, p.14). We are interested, not only in personal development and change, but also in putting pressure on the social and political norms that have created inequity. We hope our work will encourage and support participants to become problem posers and problem solvers on issues that touch their lives, rather than passive recipients of information that has little meaning to them outside the classroom.

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Conclusion

Push acted as a strong catalyst for the work my students have done and are still doing on La COCINA de Vida. I'm certain that we would not have been as successful thus far if it had not been for the influence of *Push* and the liberation it gave students in self-identifying and recognizing that change, even in the most dire circumstances, is possible.

The overall objectives of the project were both to create an interactive forum for learners to work through these issues and to produce a product that students feel will be useful for other learners working through these areas. I think we have been successful thus far in meeting these objectives. Journal reflections by the students perhaps tell the story best:

> *Writing and talking about my experiences through domestic violence and isolation reminds me of how good and well I'm doing with my life today. That's what makes me continue.*—Julie

> *This week I've enjoyed reading stories and letting people know about my problems.... You know I'm not embarrassed about it. I feel even better now. I don't cry about it because I have made myself stronger by doing so.*—Jessie

> *I enjoy learning more about sexual and domestic violence. I enjoyed our discussion we had in our class and on our handouts and class feedback. I learned today that we all can have an issue or something referring to domestic violence or sexual harassment. It's good to talk about it. I'm not so sure if I get back with my girls' father if we will have the same problems or not. I'd like to not have domestic violence in my life again.*—Tara

> *I enjoy talking about and reading the poems. They help me see how I was, what I went through and how I became a strong woman and got out of that situation! I learned today that*

Women Write a Reader's Theater Based on "Push"

by Kate Power

I am a teacher of First Step, a pre-GED and technology class for women working towards economic self-sufficiency. We are located at the Erie Neighborhood House, a community-based agency in Chicago's West Town neighborhood. My students are Latina, African American, and European American and range in age from 18 to 50.

I use a response-centered, literature-based approach to teaching reading, searching for fiction, non-fiction and poetry that speak to key themes and challenges in the women's lives. As a class, we have read the poetry of Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde and Marge Piercy, the novel *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, selected biographies of women activists from *Herstory: Women Who Changed the World* and the history text, *Women in the U.S. Work Force*. Earlier this year, the women voted to read *Push* after sampling a short excerpt in class. This novel proved to be one of the most generative that we read together. As Anson Green explains, the novel *Push* is dense with themes that women in adult basic education programs can relate to. In our discussions, the women felt comfortable talking frankly about violence, racism and sexuality. The theme that seemed to speak to our particular group most strongly was that of the struggle to stay in school despite obstacles and previous failures. Like Precious Jones, the main character of the book, many of the women in the class had been told by welfare case workers that they needed to drop out of our program in favor of immediate entry into the work force. During our reading of the novel we all fought for the right of women to define for themselves the most appropriate route to self-sufficiency.

The use of literature in the adult education classroom provides ample opportunities for our students to reflect on their own experiences. Literature also opens doors to understanding differences through the experiences and perspectives of others. One activity that I used to encourage the women to read from multiple perspectives was the creation of a Reader's Theater. To do this, I put the names of some of the characters in the book on folded slips of paper in a basket. I had each student select a slip of paper. I then explained that they would be writing a short piece in the voice of that character. To model this, I distributed and read aloud a sample piece I had written in the voice of Carl Jones, Precious' abusive father. I deliberately selected this character to demonstrate how to take the leap to understanding something from the point of view of someone who is different from me and decidedly unsympathetic.

I provided the women with a work sheet with the following questions in order to help them return to the book, looking for specific details to weave into their pieces: What does the character look like? What are some of the specific life experiences that have shaped this character? What are some of the things the character likes or believes in? What are some of the specific things that the character said or did to, for, or with Precious? The women then set to work rereading the text, both individually and in pairs, using post-it notes to mark relevant sections of the text and using the work sheet I provided to take notes. Then they drafted, revised, and word-processed their pieces, selecting fonts and borders they felt represented their characters. We then began rehearsing an oral rendition of the text. We worked on the Reader's Theater off and on for about three weeks. At the end of each unit the class works on, I have students prepare portfolios of some of their work to present at a celebration party. At the *Push* celebration party we performed the Reader's Theater for friends and unveiled the text posted on our First Step web page.

The First Step class was sponsored in part with a curriculum development grant from Laubach Women in Literacy USA. A curriculum guide explaining how I used *Push* in the classroom and copies of the Reader's Theater are available from Laubach by calling 315-422-9121. Both the curriculum and the Reader's Theater are also posted on the First Step web page: <www.luc.edu/depts/curl/prag/pragust/erie/firststep>.

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there are so many girls and women going through violent relationships, that I wasn't the only one. I'd like to do more stories with the project. I'd like to read more about abuse and battered women. I'd like to write about it to help others. I guess cause I was one of the women for about five years.—Anna Marie

La COCINA is going to be a great project not only for others, but it's also helping us learn to cope with or help someone cope with the problems we've been through. The things that I've been able to do I hope will help others to deal with their problems better than I did.—Cecilia

Students have moved from viewing their experiences as individualized, isolated suffering to expressing healing and reconciliation as well as the empowering recognition that their work can assist others. This change in perspective is a result of profound reflection and introspection as well as significant personal transformation. In addition, Anna Marie and Cecilia's statements strongly reflect how incorporating individual transformation within a framework can facilitate change within a larger community of learners.

Notes

1) My forthcoming article, "Teaching Through Trauma: When Learning Moves Beyond the Books," *Linkages* (forthcoming), explains the importance of building connections with local social service agencies which can professionally assist students with counseling services.

2) Horsman, J. Keynote speaker at the 1998 International Conference on Women and Literacy.

3) For more information on these projects see: "'Something to Think About': A Student Generated Project That Reaches Into the Community," ERIC Document 1999 (ED 422 467), and "MUJER (Mother's United for Jobs, Education and Results) 1997-8 Project FORWARD Project-based Learning Project Summary," ERIC Document 1999 (ED 422 465).

4) Other aspects of out work with *Push* can be found in: "PUSHing the Envelope: Using Sapphire's Controversial Novel in the ABE Classroom," *The Change Agent*, World Education/New England Literacy Resource Center, Boston MA (March 1999); and "Risky Material in the Classroom: Using Sapphire's Novel *Push*," *All Write News*, Adult Literacy Resource Institute/SABES Greater Boston Regional Support Center (January/February 1999).

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Personal Connections

by Dianne Roy

I would like to share with you what a "Connections" reading program is and my experiences as a participant/instructor with adult learners and this program. The Vermont Council on the Humanities offers Connections, a thematic reading and discussion series for beginning-to-intermediate reading levels, free of charge for adult basic education students, at-risk middle or high school students, HeadStart or EvenStart families, inmates, teen parents or other specialized audiences.

I have been involved with the Connections reading program since it was first introduced to Vermont Adult Learning in 1986. I recall my fellow instructor, Sally, offering "something" at our local library for staff and students. I thought I would "check it out." Initially students were not interested. I had to promote the idea. I brought the books to students' homes to show them. My basic message was, "Are you interested in owning these? Yes? Well, then, follow me."

I have been offering the Connections reading program to adult readers ranging in age from their teens to 70-plus years of age. Their levels of ability range as widely as their ages. The goal, however, is the same: to improve their education, become better readers, have the books to begin or add to their personal libraries and, of equal value, to be able to come together for the discussions. My students quickly felt the impact of the Connections

program in their lives, but Connections really shook up my classroom only in the last year. In this article, I trace the impact Connections has had on me and on my learners.

Getting Started

The Vermont Council on the Humanities has compiled into a booklet lists of children's books dealing with themes ranging from "Call to Ancient Stories" to "Sports." The themes and books have been selected by planning teams including scholars, librarians, Adult Basic Education teachers and students. The books range from picture books to the more advanced reading level of chapter books. (The Connections program uses children's literature as a basis for reading for new adult readers. The books in the Connections program are referred to as "children's literature" or "picture books"—maybe so, but they are ageless as we all are.) Once a teacher signs on to do Connections, the Council provides a trained humanities scholar who leads the three discussion sessions. The time span varies. The sessions can be scheduled once a week, every other week or even once a month. I can choose any scholar from a list provided to me by the VCH. Peter, our scholar, has been with us for several years. It is my responsibility to contact him and arrange the time and place for the discussions. I try to schedule a program at least six weeks in advance. He has become an "old" friend to us.

> ***If you had told me that students would join an eight-week poetry class on Saturday mornings, write poems, and recite their poetry to a general audience, I would have said, "Never."***

Prior to the discussions each participant is given one to three books to read for the upcoming session. If a student is unable to read the books I will read the books to them individually or in a group setting (depending on how I work with the student academically). The books are theirs to keep forever! The Connections books become treasured possessions. Participants have shared that they allow others to read their books but that the books do not leave their sight. Bea said, "It made me really want to go ahead. Even at my age of seventy-three years old! It has allowed me to do things that I never had a chance to do: go back to school, get my education, making my goal—the satisfaction!" She also went on to say that her great-grandson wants "Gram" to read to him. She shares her Connections books with her grandchildren and her great-grandchildren. When I go into homes to work with students, I often see the Connections books proudly displayed on makeshift shelves where they are read over and over again. Many students have never owned a book before.

The Vermont Council on the Humanities offers two related but independent programs in addition to the Connections series. Each year the Council sponsors a conference for adult literacy students and staff. Council members work with a committee of learners and teachers to choose a theme. As with the Connections discussion series, there are recommended children's books which learners are given in advance of the conference. Learners keep the books. At the conference, students discuss the books. The Council also has a pot of money which can fund an artist-in-residence. Programs can apply and an artist will work with learners on a project related to the conference theme.

Over time, students found the Connections discussions so rewarding that they asked to expand the discussion sessions. What was once three one-hour sessions is now three two-hour sessions. This past year students again wanted more. They wanted more on the theme than just the book discussions. This is the first year that I used the Connections themes as the basis for my curriculum.

Setting the Tone

A Connections reading program is an experience that will forever affect all participants in a very meaningful and powerful way. It is a new experience for most participants. It not only gives us an opportunity to discuss books in a library setting with other adults, but also invites us to take a big risk, a dangerous one, to show our human side, our shortcomings, as we stumble publicly over words. However, we are assured that our words and thoughts are valued by the whole group.

Peter's role, as a scholar, is to lead the discussion beyond the words on the pages. He has us discussing the pictures: details, color, style, mood, how the words relate to the pictures. If we had no words, we could still tell the story. He has us do role-playing, thinking about what we would do in various situations. He asks, have we indeed been in those situations before? What did we do? Many times he will bring in other poems or books to supplement the theme. He has the participants read aloud if they wish. He asks them the week before to prepare the story by practicing their reading at home with family. He always says, "You may pass if you want to." (Very seldom does anyone pass.) If a participant is unable to read, I

"team-read" with the person.

Connections is more than reading words. It is relating the stories to our own experiences, be they good or bad. Roland, a fifty-something-year-old student of mine, shared with me that in school he was always made fun of. He left school in the third grade unable to read. Now, he would faithfully come to class each week after a ten-plus-hour day. Through the Connections program Roland gained his freedom from the stigma of not having his ideas valued. (At work, he had told his employer that there were some "wrong-doings" going on, but they would tell him that, since he could not read, he did not know the rules.) Roland learned how to read by participating in a Connections series called "Friends." The first book that he ever read cover to cover was *Frog and Toad Are Friends*. Words escape me to share with you the effect this had on this man's life. He now reads books like *Green Mountain Man* and *Historical Roots*, a Vermont historical publication. As he reads he lets the words wash over his body.

It is the power in words to be heard, to express oneself, to communicate that Connections touches. The Connections reading program allows each of us to share adult experiences, discussing literature with intelligence. People enter on equal footing. There is warmth, support and friendship expressed in a very short time. We share a common language. Many new faces have come but they all tell the same story: the power of books and words.

Through the Connections reading/discussion programs the students see and participate in the "process" of writing, reading, and problem-solving. They witness the teacher as an "assistant," not a "know-all instructor." We work together as a team, each of us contributing on equal ground. I've been blessed to have had the opportunity to be an active participant with my fellow students. If an "outsider" were to venture into the room, he/she would not know that this was a discussion being held by adult new readers.

When a series is over participants are asked to evaluate the sessions. At first some do not have too much to write. They have not been asked for their ideas before. Over time, given support and encouragement, they do not hesitate to share how to make the program better. It may take some longer to share but they can't keep quiet for very long. They are a valuable resource. The sessions are a very positive experience for each participant. The books connect with them and they all have an experience or comment to share. Over the years Connections programs have given me rare opportunities to be a part of "transformations."

Students' Reactions

Consider all of us "Dorothys" in the land of Oz. The ability was always within each of us to be able to read. We just needed the opportunity to recognize it. Connections reading programs do that. One student, Shirley, said, "Before Connections I read, but now for the first time I'm really reading. I'm over fifty years old too!" And Joan said, "When I'm reading a book, I get lost in the story. You sail through it. You learn about others' trials and tribulations. The maze of life."

Michelle, a student who attended the first literacy conference eleven years ago, remains in contact with me. We were each given a set of Little House books. She continues to collect and expand her library. Recently she stopped me and said, "You know I was in Book King and there is another book out." A couple of nights later I stopped by her home to drop off two more in the series. I laughingly told her that she was slipping. She then said that she had not had time to get to the bookstore. Before, Michelle would never have thought to go to a bookstore to look for books. Connections has made books accessible and a part of her daily life now. She told me as I was leaving that, as a new book arrives in the series, she begins at the beginning of the series and reads the books all over again.

Terry participated in an eight-week poetry program called "Words in My Blood, Poetry by Heart." Peter, the scholar, helped her write a poem for her husband. She had always told me that she could not "read." I believed her. I had no reason not to. One poetry session she brought her assignment in. We had been asked to bring in a favorite poem to share with the group. She had prepared all week for this moment. Terry read a poem by Helen Steiner Rice. Thank goodness the chair had four legs holding me up. My mouth dropped. I asked her after the session about this advanced reading. She never really responded that I recall. She was asked to read that poem at our annual student recognition. Terry proudly stood up in front of strangers and family and read the poem. What a moment! I am always speechless.

Participants go beyond reading and discussing books at the library. They have gone out into their communities to share this empowering program. Some have gone to their children's schools and talked about the Connections program. Before Connections programs the participants read very little if at all. They rarely talked about issues, to say nothing about going to the library to select books or participate in a book discussion program.

I am always listening and trying to encourage new participants to join. It is hard. Yet the participants have ownership in these programs. They become recruiters for other Connections reading programs. This leads to some special friendships outside of the program. Vermont, being a rural state, needs these programs to provide people with opportunities to interact with others. Learners are so eager for these moments that they arrive early to set up the room and refreshment table. Then they visit with each other before the program begins.

Incorporating Connections Programs Into My Classes

Previous success and students' interest motivated me to incorporate Connections programs more strongly into my classes. This year I created a course around a topic that had been suggested by students, and I looked to find an appropriate Connections series to complement it. I have participated in enough reading programs that I now feel very comfortable, with my students' assistance, traveling to libraries and bookstores and asking people about quality children's literature on a certain theme that would also appeal to new adult readers. As the course is underway I introduce to those who are not familiar with my "reputation" that I would like them to create something to illustrate the theme.

I remember my first attempt to weave a Connections theme into class work three years ago. I thought it was a great idea to create a quilt depicting the time periods in American history. I was so excited about the project that I had the quilt already made in my mind. The students just sat silently when I told them about the project. Thank goodness it was Friday. It was agreed that they were to think about it over the weekend and come in on Monday to tell me what they were going to do. I must say here that they were non-sewers, but I had confidence in them.

Monday morning arrived with my having had a rough weekend trying to come up with another idea. I greeted them and said, "I heard your enthusiasm on Friday about the quilt idea. I have decided to scrap that idea. I want you to create a 'Jeopardy' game instead using your notes and materials from class." I thought I was going to be knocked out. Their response was anything but silent. They were very vocal in stating that they had spent all weekend thinking about a quilt square for particular time periods and now I was changing my mind again.

They created an exquisite quilt. My version won't even be mentioned. I was in awe of the talents that they had kept hidden over the years. They went further than creating a "USA: A COUNTRY WITH A PAST" appliqué quilt. They created a narrative, including music, for each square. We planned an unveiling for this piece of work as well as a "Jeopardy" game! I was pleasantly surprised to see all the students show up to take part in this show. Some had never been a part of a public performance before. I still hear the gasps from the audience and see the students standing taller and saying, "Yes, I did this with my own hands."

I tied poetry into my Vermont History course, "Traveling the Backroads of Her Past." I asked students if they could create a poem about Vermont. All levels participated. The students were first asked to only give me words that they thought of when I said the word "Vermont." As we brainstormed, I listed all the words (as there was nobody else willing to be the scribe). When we had no more to say, we looked to see what groupings could be made of the words and added details to create a "word picture." Doing this brought into discussion our youth and how much times have changed--an oral history. We revised many times and wound up with a poem called "Close Your Eyes...See Vermont."

I remind students that the first step is ideas: "Don't worry about spelling and punctuation yet." I tell them to think of the process as a "No-Fail Recipe For Writing." First you get a large pot (paper), gather your ingredients (ideas), mix these thoughts around, stir, simmer, add more or less, simmer longer. (This is the final editing phase.) When ready, pour it into the pan and bake. (Print it.)

Another poetry course saw students writing their own poems and putting them in a book to share. The final performance was an invitation to the general public for a poetry recitation. We recited poems that we had memorized as well as original poems. If you had told me that students would join an eight-week poetry class on Saturday mornings, write poems, and recite their poetry to a general audience, I would have said, "Never." The poetry projects have been great. The students have dis-

covered that poetry isn't that "stuff" we agonized over in our earlier school "daze"! Here are some students' comments:

I was hesitant about doing a poetry class because I didn't understand poetry, and writing comes hard for me. My teacher told me that it would help me with my writing. She was right. Words are coming a little easier than before. I am putting words together better. I find writing, reading and learning poetry a lot of fun! For me to say that is pretty surprising, for sometimes I find writing a nightmare.—Janet

Poetry writing for me has been fun but at the same time educational. I have trouble with the bigger words, but when I write poetry I find myself looking in the dictionary. In her class I learned that poetry doesn't have to rhyme like they teach you in school, but just by gathering up words to put together to make a poem. Now people might think that a poem written like this may not make any sense, but when we read what we had written they all sounded great.—Alice

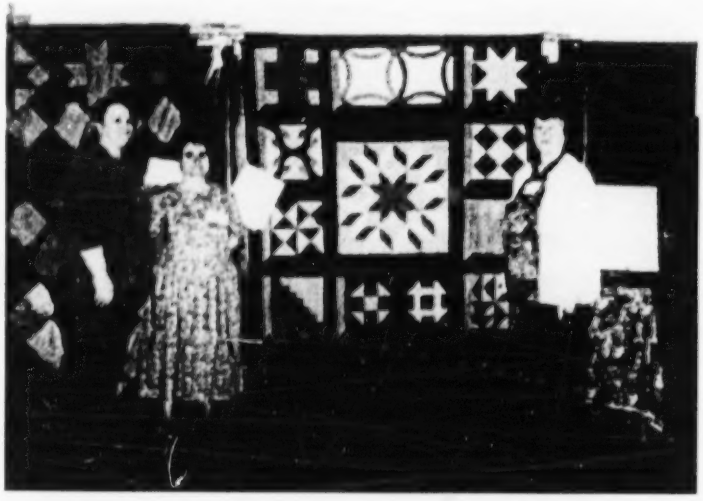
I have enjoyed all the Connections I have been to. I enjoy writing and reading more than ever. I don't want to ever not read or write. Verandah is a great inspiration to me. I never knew I could have the ability to write and have my work feel so good. ABE has helped me find a pot of gold at the end of my pencil.—Bea

The students, wanting to be better prepared for the state adult literacy conference, requested that we take the Connections programs further. I was up to the challenge. They wanted a "detailed" course based on our conference theme, "The Underground Railroad: Fact and Fiction," so for the first time I planned to continue the theme for a full year of coursework. Last summer I began to research the theme, with plans to wrap up in April, 1999. The course was called "No More Auction Block for Me." Our route would begin in Africa, sail to America with the early slaves, and continue their journey through the Civil War. The course would include reading, writing, math, science, music, cooking, field trips, movies, special guests' talks, and using the computer to do research. I drew from a couple of Connections series to fill out the course. In addition, I typed up a "suggested" reading list that the students could choose from.

Did students relate to this era, to the plight of Africans being captured and sold? Joyce, a new adult reader, called me on the phone one Saturday morning to tell me that she had read a whole book in a day and a half. She did not do any housework during that time. "You know, I couldn't put the book down." She spread the word to other students. *Letters From a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs* by Mary E. Lyons is in such demand that I had to add more copies to our lending library.

In February I held Saturday movie/lunch dates. The movies included: *Amistad*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Race to Freedom*, *Glory*, and *Shenandoah*. We held discussions after each viewing. The Vermont Council on the Humanities was also sponsoring several events in the area on the Underground Railroad and Vermonters in the Civil War. The students were able to attend Civil War meetings, meet Howard Coffin, author of *Nine Months to Gettysburg*, and historian Ray Zirblis, and see two Civil War re-enactment groups. These hands-on activities made history come alive. It reinforced what was being presented in class. As one student said, "I am living the Civil War era today." I was also able to get a copy of a document written by Vermonter Mark Wheeler, who was a prisoner at Andersonville. This led to the viewing of the movie *Andersonville*. (This summer we will do a Connections series called "Real History, Real Voices." This series uses excerpts from diaries, letters and oral histories of Vermonters to explore what life was like years ago, and still is today. The students will begin to prepare oral histories of their families as a project. They will learn how to interview people and how to go about finding records using local resources as well as writing to people.)

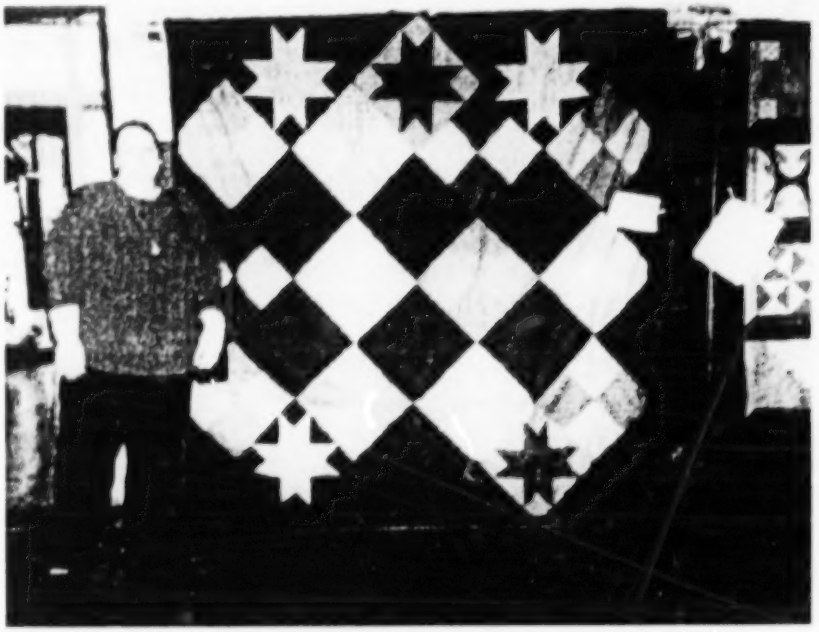
In our course we used a Connections program titled "Slavery and the Civil War." The students read and discussed eight books on this theme. Each session I would bring in a collection of books for the students to take



home to read. One of the books was *Sweet Sarah and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkinson. We had discussed the quilting aspect in class as related to the Underground Railroad and the ladies' societies. I had found several books: *Quilts From the Civil War,* by Barbara Brackman; *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad,* by Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard; *Clues in the Calico: A Guide to Identifying and Dating Antique Quilts,* by Barbara Brackman; *Dating Fabrics: A Color Guide 1800-1960,* by Eileen Jahnke Trestain. (In using this source a student attending one of the re-enactment presentations noted that the fabric one of the ladies chose to make a dress out of was not historically accurate). The students wanted to sew an Underground Railroad quilt based on the books *Quilts From the Civil War* and *Hidden in Plain View.* It is a work in progress (shown on previous page). We had to chart a "plan of action," figuring out how much fabric the quilt would take, the color of the thread, how to create the designs, and when we would be able to go (budget our money!). Because non-sewers were going to be involved in this project, I searched for a new method for creating the patterns. My local quilt shop was responsible for steering me to the book *The It's Okay if You Sit on My Quilt Book,* by Mary Ellen Hopkins, a great reference that has the quilter sew each patchwork square using graph paper to create the geometric design! The sewing class has enough experience now so that they are able to look at a design and see the "pieces" used to construct the overall design and assist those who need help.

The students took a field trip to KeepSake Quilting Shop in Centre Harbor, New Hampshire, to purchase reproduction Civil War fabric. (For many students these field trips are the first time out of their town or state. They are memorable social drives.) The sewing portion of the project was a wonderful way to tie in reading, following directions, and math skills (reading a ruler, fractions, measuring, and vocabulary). The opportunity came up that allowed me to ask a student to figure the perimeter of the square so that we could add a border. Janet responded, "I know how to do that. If it weren't for the math class I would never have been able to do that." At the end of the project, each person wrote a brief summary about their part of the quilt and its significance, explaining the "hidden" meaning behind each square. To conclude our project we will travel to Boston in June and walk the "Black Heritage Trail" and also visit local Underground Railroad sites in Vermont.

In addition, Joanne, a quilter now for two years, herself created a quilt called "Underground Railroad"



(shown here) that was displayed in the Maple Leaf Quilters quilt show. She based it on a quilt of the same title in *Quilts From the Civil War.* Helen took a scene from *Follow the Drinking Gourd* and created a "window display." She also made Confederate and Union soldiers from felt. "These are made from a pattern I found in a book. I designed the clothes from a pattern picture that Dianne lent me. I made it over to fit what I wanted them to do." Joyce learned how to do counted cross stitch from a class offered last year by a student. She chose to graph and stitch the Gettysburg Address. She had just returned from a trip to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and had a postcard with the Gettysburg Address on it. She also did a presentation to the class on the battlegrounds, using her pictures and brochures. Janet sewed the two Confederate flags of the Civil War. She had read about them and wanted to make that contribution for the display at the conference.

Conclusion

This is a brief view of the Connections reading program in Vermont and how I integrate it into my courses for adult learners. There are so many possibilities with each book. It is important to try different methods in order to reach those who have found the "traditional"

ways of teaching not meeting their needs.

Of course, exploiting Connections in so many ways hasn't happened overnight but rather has evolved over the years. I have learned many lessons and as each session passes I revise once again. I cannot imagine my courses without the benefit of the Connections reading programs. They are a vital link to the subjects being taught. I am familiar with the "textbook" route, but, since becoming involved with Vermont's Council on the Humanities and the Connections programs, my presentations and methods have been enhanced by the use of real diaries, children's literature and picture books to teach subjects. The students really respond in a positive way to this method. They bring in articles from newspapers and magazines, share books that they have read, bring in special guest speakers, and keep me informed of related programs. It makes the challenge of including all levels in one class easier to manage without compromising anyone's intelligence. The Connections reading programs free us from our "illiteracy cells."

Now we have just participated in our eleventh annual Adult Literacy Student Conference on "The Underground Railroad: Fact and Fiction." While preparing my students for it, I joked to them that I had been "forced" to read so many books! We all laughed because Connections allows me the freedom to make time to read. One title that I read was *NightJohn*, by Gary Paulsen. In the book, NightJohn relates the power of reading. He says that reading meant "freedom," that the letter "A" stands on its own two feet. Another title, *A Picture of Freedom: The Diary of Clotee, a Slave Girl*, by Patricia C. McKissack, told of a slave girl trying to teach herself how to read. The master prohibits this, and she understands that it must be something powerful. She writes letters in the dirt or on a piece of paper. As she writes these letters, words form and, with these words, images. For example: H-o-m-e: "I sees Belmont Plantation and all the people that live here." T-r-e-e: "the live oak behind the kitchen where I come to write." F-r-i-e-n-d: she sees two people that are dear to her. When it comes to the word "freedom" she has no image. "The word never showed me no picture. No wonder I don't see nothin. I been spellin it 'Fredum.'" She rewrites it correctly, but still "nothin." "Spelled right or wrong, freedom got no picture, no magic, freedom is just a word." But she continues her struggle, and finally her epitaph reads:"FREEDOM IS MORE THAN A WORD." For my students, too, reading now involves making a personal connection to words.

For further information on the Connections reading program you may contact the Vermont Council on the Humanities at 200 Park Street, Morrisville, VT 05661-8659 or by e-mail at <vch@together.net>. Their website is located at <vermonthumanities.org>. The phone number is (802) 888-3183, and the fax number is (802) 888-1236. •

Read for Change

by
Joanne Arnaud

READ for CHANGE is a week-long celebration of reading sponsored by the Boston Adult Literacy Fund. For two years, READ for CHANGE has benefited the adult literacy programs in Greater Boston that are funded by the Boston Adult Literacy Fund. BALF wanted to develop a grass-roots fundraiser that would be fun, easy, effective, and educational. READ for CHANGE fits these criteria and allows students and literacy practitioners to participate at the level that is comfortable for them. READ for CHANGE participants raise money for each hour they read. All reading, in any language, counts—novels, ads in the T, web pages, children's homework, newspapers. We reward the hours spent reading instead of the total pages or number of books read so readers at all levels can feel free to participate. Participants ask people to sponsor them by pledging a certain amount per hour for each hour they read.

Each participating adult literacy program is given forms and student hand-outs explaining the mechanisms of READ for CHANGE. We give them pledge sheets that contain information specific to their program so that each request for support is also an act of educating the public about the program. The programs keep all the money that they raise. BALF only asks them to let us know how much they raise, how many students partici-

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pate, and the name of the student who raises the most money. Local bookstores donate $25 gift certificates to BALF to be awarded to the student winners.

Many adult literacy students tell us that they want to give something back to their programs, but they have small incomes and many responsibilities. READ for CHANGE allows them to help their programs by asking their friends, relatives, co-workers, and families to pledge, even small amounts. One woman asked her fellow parishioners to sponsor her with a dollar. She told her program director that standing up to ask was a very big step for her and one that increased her self-confidence when almost all of the people she asked agreed to sponsor her.

Many adult literacy students tell us that they want to give something back to their programs, but that have small incomes and many responsibilities.

When we began to plan, we realized that students from other cultures might be unfamiliar with the concept of "thons." Since we also wanted to make the procedures simple and comprehensible to all adult learners, we asked several ESL and beginning reading teachers to review the hand-outs to make sure that our language was appropriate and our meaning was clear.

Appreciating how incredibly overworked program staff are, the last thing we wanted to do was to impose another burden on them. Participation is purely voluntary. Programs that do take part have found it to be worthwhile. It brings together their staff, students, neighbors, and volunteers in an activity that is rooted in the common endeavor of reading.

One benefit from READ for CHANGE has been the learning projects that have been created around it. Several classes use *READ for CHANGE* as part of math lessons involving decimals, multiplication and word problems. Students in another program created a huge poster where they tracked the number of hours they read that week, including the hours of those who did not wish to find sponsors. Some of their children were so enthralled by their mothers' charts that they asked to have their reading included in the calculations.

BALF also holds its own READ for CHANGE by enlisting the support of our donors and friends. We are reaching out to new supporters; some book clubs have become involved, and we hope to encourage companies to participate as sponsors of programs' efforts or as participating teams of readers. We are beginning to reach out to middle and high school students as well.

In the last two years our collective efforts have raised over $12,000, increased awareness about adult literacy, and developed a new respect for how indispensable reading is for us all. BALF plans to make this an annual fundraising event. After all, where else can you raise money for a good cause just by curling up on the couch with a good book? Please call us at 617-720-0181 if you are interested in participating or would like to help us make next fall's READ for CHANGE more exciting and successful. •

Reading Whole Books in ESOL

by
Felipe Vaquerano

A few months ago, we had a staff meeting at East Boston Harborside Community Center, where I work, and we were told that Tana Reiff would be coming to our center in the near future. She was coming to meet with staff and to spend a few minutes with a group of students. We were shown a couple of her books and were asked to read or at least look through them quickly to see if anything was interesting. After we had passed them around, the second question came up: "Who would like to meet with Tana Reiff and have their class meet with her as well?"

My first response was "What do I need to do if I want my students to meet with her?" I was told that we needed to read at least one of her books in class to make students more familiar with her before the meeting. That was not a bad idea, I thought. Even though I had never heard of her or seen her books, just the idea of meeting with a writer was enough for me to say: "I am interested in doing it."

In order for me and my class to get ready for the big day, I started to spend more time going through her books. When I read *The Family from Vietnam* I said to myself, "This is the one. This is the perfect match with my class." I found this book so interesting and informative, and, most of all, I found the story to be somewhat similar to many situations I went through back in my country,

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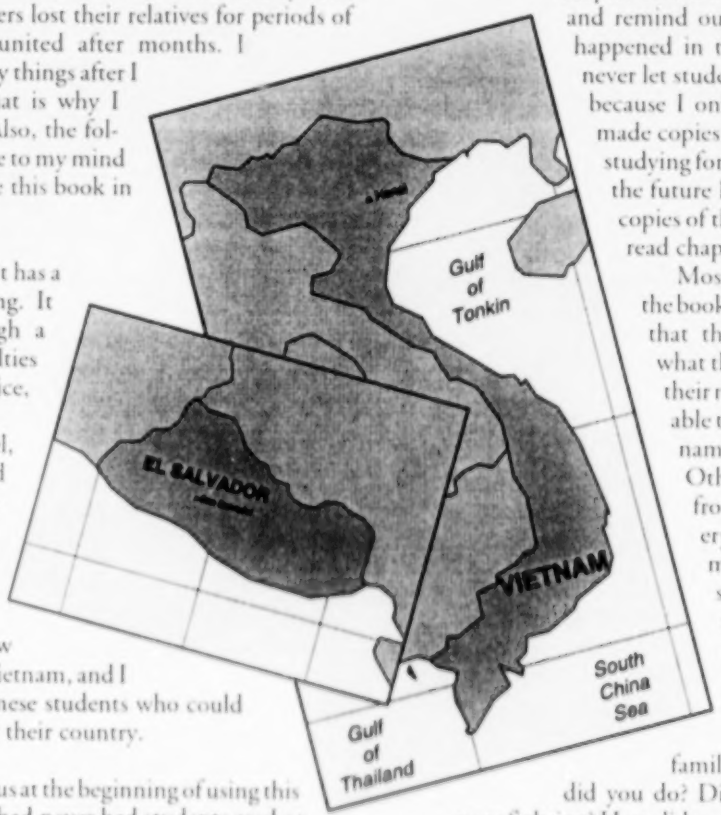
El Salvador, because of the war. *The Family from Vietnam* is a book based on how families get separated because of the political problems Vietnam is going through. It shows how much they suffer while they are away from each other. At the end, they reunite and everybody is happy. The same thing happened in El Salvador. Many families were split apart. Some people moved to the cities looking for safety, others came to the USA if they could afford it, while others lost their relatives for periods of time and were reunited after months. I thought about many things after I read the book. That is why I decided to use it. Also, the following reasons came to my mind when I chose to use this book in my ESOL 2 class:

- The story is nice. It has a very sad beginning. It takes you through a journey of difficulties until it gets to a nice, happy ending.
- The writing level, the vocabulary and the length of the story seemed appropriate for my class.
- Most of my students did not know too much about Vietnam, and I had some Vietnamese students who could tell us more about their country.



I was very nervous at the beginning of using this book just because I had never had students read an entire book in class. I always thought that reading a book was out of the question in my class. I was afraid that students might feel like they were wasting class time. Although we had read stories from several books, reading an entire book was quite challenging. The only advantage I had was the fact that, in my mind, I had chosen the perfect book to read.

Before we began reading, I told my students that Tana Reiff was a writer who was coming to spend some time with our class. As a class, we would have the opportunity to ask questions about writing. I also told them that in order for us to get to know her a little bit, we needed to read at least one of her books together during class time. They all liked the idea!

My lessons were simple and straightforward. For four days, we would spend enough time to read three chapters. It was easy to read three chapters as part of a lesson, because the chapters are very short. I think that I would have read fewer chapters if they had been longer. Students took turns reading. We stopped after each chapter to go over vocabulary and to talk about the chapter in general. By doing this, we made sure everybody was understanding the story before we continued. We would also predict what would happen in the next chapter. We would write a little summary of every chapter so we would be able to go back and remind ourselves about what had happened in the previous chapters. I never let students take the book home because I only had one copy. I just made copies of the chapters we were studying for the night. I think that in the future I might try to give them copies of the book and ask them to read chapters for homework.

Most of the students loved the book! Many of them thought that the story was similar to what they had lived through in their native countries and were able to identify with my Vietnamese students a lot more. Others just learned a lot from reading this book. Everybody wanted to learn more about Vietnam and started asking questions to my Vietnamese students. Some of the questions they asked were: How did the war start? Did your family get separated? What did you do? Did you know why they were fighting? How did you come to the USA? The Vietnamese students became an informal panel for a great discussion about what had happened in Vietnam. At this point one of the quietest students in the class started talking and talking as I had never seen him do before. I am sure the familiarity of what we were talking about made him feel really comfortable. I have to say that this was the best part of the project! The discussion was very interactive. Other students also shared similar experiences of living in countries going through wars, especially the Salvadorean students.

I also shared my own experience by telling them how my family was split when the war first began in El Salvador. My father had to buy a house in the city for my teenager brothers and sisters and myself, because it was not safe for us to be in the country. My father and my mother had to stay in the country with my younger brothers and sisters. A year later, my mother had to move to the city and my father had to stay in the country. He

moved to live with his parents because he could not be living by himself. I also shared many other things that happened.

I felt somewhat uncomfortable when we first started reading the book. Lots of ideas came to my head: Would they like this? Is this going to work? Are they going to understand it? Is this going to be boring? On the other hand, I was excited to see what the outcome would be. Although things worked out okay this time, there are many things I would do differently if I were going to do it again:

- I would plan better lessons. I would adapt them to what we are working on, instead of doing the reading separately. In the case of *The Family from Vietnam* I could have talked about comparatives, past tense, etc. to extend the reading a little more.
- I would have a panel where students from other countries with similar experiences could share their stories. I would make sure they feel comfortable doing it, though.
- I would research more about whatever reading I am working on, to make sure I do a good job when leading a discussion group.
- I would write a list of questions to be asked, in this case, to the Vietnamese students. I would copy them and give them to every student in the class. These questions would be used to ensure that everyone participated in the discussion.
- I would pick what I think would be new vocabulary words for the students and prepare exercises using them: Use this word in a sentence (verbally), fill in the blanks, etc.
- I would ask students to write in response to the reading. I would compile those writings, type them up, print them, and bring them back in a following lesson to use as reading materials.
- As we are reading the book, I would ask students to write predictions about what they think will happen in the next chapter. I would use these predictions for discussion before reading the next chapter.
- We would write a summary after each chapter to have as a reference throughout the reading time.
- I would do more follow-up activities with each chapter. I would white-out some words and ask students to fill in the blanks. These words could be prepositions, past tense verbs, comparatives, or whatever we are working on.
- I would have a bigger list of questions to be asked after each chapter. Some questions could be answered verbally, others in writing.

I completely believe that, as a teacher, I have to take risks to do new things.

Looking back at what I did, I am glad I took the risk of doing it! It was worth trying. I really think I would do it again. I feel like this was a great learning experience where I once again convinced myself to never take anything for granted. I truly believe that students enjoyed it as much as I did, which pleases me.

I completely believe that, as a teacher, I have to take risks to do new things. If they don't work, fine. At least I tried them. Many times, the lesson you are thinking of—but are afraid of trying—could be one of the best lessons in your teaching career! •

Reading for Love (and Learning)

by
Nancy Teel

So much depends on reading. On the job, in school, in personal health and in family life, reading well can make all the difference between success and failure. As teachers, we know that reading is key to writing well, to studying well, to becoming an independent life-long learner. But in this time of electronic images, the resurgence of visual and symbolic culture, teaching students to read books, using the old linear technology, is a daunting task. They are used to reading bits and pieces, advertisements and headlines, receipts and recipes, not to turning two hundred and fifty pages in order.

Summertime. Sunlight filters through the trees as I finish *What It's Like to Live Now*, a memoir by Meredith Maran. At midnight, leaning against my pillows, I struggle through painful scenes of the Vietnam War in *After Sorrow* by Lady Borton. As I sip tea in my kitchen on a cloudy afternoon, Carolyn Forche's poetry sends me into reminiscence and longing I didn't know I had. *Reds* by Tom Bates makes the terrifying days of the late sixties come alive in my nineties living room. Reading and longing, reading and remembering, reading and learning happen as I move from academic journals to poetry of witness, from pop novels to serious fiction. As I read, my mind works beyond the page to call up powerful emotions, past experiences, connections I've never made before. Time passes, an afternoon in the office, an evening

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in the public library; hours dissolve into thought, absorbing meaning from books. In this I'm not unusual, but just a normal good reader, like most teachers, like many people. But not like many of my students.

On the first day of class my students grasp their books tightly; they have spent many dollars they can't really afford on these heavy blocks of paper. As we preview our textbooks each semester, their body language is rigid, uncomfortable. Many do not wish to page through, looking at chapter titles, reading the end first. They prefer to keep their books pristine, pages unturned. Annotation seems like a violation to them. They have learned not to touch, not to ruffle, not to use. Their physical relationship with books reflects the discomfort of an apprentice with an unfamiliar tool. Perhaps there is a danger lurking in its use. Perhaps there is embarrassment at not knowing how.

[My students'] physical relationship with books reflects the discomfort of an apprentice with an unfamiliar tool.

During my sixteen years at Roxbury Community College I have struggled to teach English Composition I and II, the freshman writing courses that provide the basis for the next three years of college work. Teaching writing is difficult, even heartbreaking at times, but always truly exciting as students begin to find their own voices. Unfortunately many students are halted in their development as writers when they begin to do research. For them, reading is a barrier. They are able to read short articles, essays, and pieces of textbooks with effort, but reading longer and more difficult passages is closed to them. They do not have the reading experience to understand the context of the books and articles they find in their research. A few years ago, I decided I had to face the reading barrier and address it much more directly in my teaching. What follows is an account of my search for an approach that would help my students gain skills and experience and find enjoyment in reading. I have not found easy answers, but I do have some positive steps to report.

As a first step in confronting my students' reading problems, I decided to try teaching the Pre-College Reading course. It was developed by the English Department to give focused study to students who could not achieve mid-high school reading level on the standardized tests used to place students in English Composition I. By looking at the problems at an earlier point in a student's college career, I thought I could understand them better. I believe that what I found is similar to what many ABE teachers face.

There are more differences than similarities among my students in a typical class in Pre-College Reading. They come from different language backgrounds. Some have come from the ESOL program at RCC; others have learned English on their own as adults. A significant number have serious life problems. There are often students with physical challenges in class. One or two may identify themselves as having learning problems. But even so, for the vast majority of students, decoding is not a problem. They have mastered the mechanics of reading, but words trip them and larger meanings elude them. To use reading to think through an issue, to illuminate life, to see the metaphorical nature of literature, to enjoy the art of poetry, these are doors that my students have not yet had the opportunity to open. What they share most is an amazing (to me anyway) lack of experience in reading.

I prepared to teach Pre-College Reading with a review of the available texts from the major academic publishers. I settled on the *Reading Skills Handbook* and its later multi-cultural version *All of Us*.[1] These are well constructed books. Skills are carefully delineated, clearly explained, neatly exemplified. We worked through the books with reasonable interest and attention, making a little progress, moving forward in most cases. But for most of my students there is a long way to go. Moving up a few percentiles on a test, achieving one higher grade level in a semester is certainly progress, but not enough. Moving at that rate means that the student remains in pre-college courses for several semesters. This creates a danger of personal discouragement and of official failure to make academic progress. The drop-out rate for students in pre-college courses is high.

An assignment I originally gave in Children's Literature, a sophomore-level course taken mainly by English and Early Childhood Education majors, led me to change my approach. That assignment is a short personal essay telling the story of how the student learned to read and reflecting on that experience. As I read these essays for several semesters I noted that they were of two kinds. Many people told wonderful stories of favorite books, storytelling grandparents, angelic first grade teachers. But many did not. There was a significant group that wrote about their lack of positive experiences with reading and the way they overcame it. One top student, who later won a full scholarship to the University of Massachusetts, confided that he had only learned to read well in high school. His early experiences with reading were so traumatic that rather than reflect on them, he requested (and received) an alternative assignment. I reasoned that

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if these students, now successfully pursuing college studies, had so many negative experiences with reading, this would only be more common in students who had not yet tested into college courses.

I began to give a parallel journal-writing assignment in my Pre-College Reading class. The results should not have been surprising. The majority of students could not remember a favorite book from childhood. They did not associate any positive memories with reading. Some remembered a particular grade when they began having trouble, and in some cases when they got extra help. Of course there were exceptions, but in general the students having trouble with reading did not report positive experiences. For them reading was a school chore, not a life passion or pleasure. I reasoned that I had to take this negative emotional charge very seriously and find a way to counteract it in my classes.

As I reflected on how to address this, I came back to my own experience with reading as pleasure, relaxation, learning. I decided to try to capture my students' affections with books, with good stories as the bait. I settled on a collection of short stories with easy reading levels and an approachable format, and I assigned students to choose and read a novel.[2] The short stories were a hit from the start because they allowed everyone to have an opinion and made the class come together in spite of all our differences. The novels presented more of a challenge.

The first version of my novel assignment asked the students to choose and read a novel on their own. At the end of the semester they were to give a five-minute oral report, briefly summarizing the book and giving their own opinion of it. They had to write out a bibliography card in a format that might be used in research. I kept these cards and made a collective bibliography for them at the end of the semester. But at the beginning, I found that we had to talk about what a novel is and I had to bring in many examples. I had ordered a few copies of several novels that I thought students would enjoy. They were in the college bookstore so students could look them over before choosing. I also took them to the college library to look at the best-seller shelves and showed them the collection of used paperbacks that I lend out from my

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office. I thought this would surely be enough alternatives to give each student a chance to pick out an interesting and not-too-difficult book.

I was wrong. While my strategy did work for a quarter to a third of the class, it failed with the rest. They did not go to the bookstore, or if they did, they did not buy a book. They did not go to their local libraries, and they did not take books out of the college library. Only a handful borrowed books from my office. Instead, they asked their friends and family and picked up whatever books were lying around, if they picked a book at all. Many chose books that were not novels, prompting some very detailed looks in class at book jackets, title pages, etc. Some picked young adult books or children's books. I allowed YA books as long as the reading level was above fifth grade, warning the student that he or she might find the book childish. The children's books I declined to approve. They kept looking. Sometimes they brought in pulp novels based on movies. These I did approve with a warning that they might not be worth the effort to read, especially if one had already seen the movie, as was usually the case. I remember one talented young man who read the book based on the movie, *Hook*. When he finally gave his oral report, he rated the book low and wished that he had spent his time on a better book.

I see an excitement and interest in the class that did not exist when we worked through the textbook drills and readings in earlier semesters. Students get angry, enthusiastic, passionate about issues in the novel.

There were some sparks. A few students really loved their books and showed it in the oral reports. One woman who had been treated for dyslexia for years gave a cogent report on *The Bridges of Madison County*, commenting on the non-chronological structure of the novel and how it differed from the movie. But still the majority were unmoved. Either they did not find a book that they could read, or they did not complete the assignment. Less than half got credit for it each semester. I realized that I had to make a change. I reviewed my reasons for assigning a novel and they still were sound. A good novel would allow students to develop several reading skills: sustained interest and attention, speed, ability to read for story line and not look up every word, affective involvement, self-confidence. I kept working on it.

Since then I have changed the assignment, benefiting from suggestions from colleagues and summing up the experience each semester. The course I give now goes like this. We begin reading short stories and I present necessary literary terms: plot, character, theme, point of view, setting. After students have read about five short stories, they can grasp the meaning of these terms through comparison and contrast. Then I give out an assignment asking the students to read four two-page excerpts from novels and to decide from these which novels they would like to read as a class.[3] The class votes after everyone has had a chance to read the hand-out for a week. Anyone who didn't read it wouldn't know which book to vote for. I do not bring in the books so that book jackets, critics' remarks and length are not considered. The students have to choose based on the representative samples I have given them. Why is this better than previewing the actual books? I think it is because the students must focus on content and they do not automatically choose the shortest book. Also, I have only one set of the books, so each student would only get a few seconds to handle a book being passed around, but the eight-page hand-out is theirs to keep, and they do spend the time needed to read it.

Perhaps it was the air of mystery and competition around this assignment the first time I used it that caused almost everyone to read the hand-out and have an opinion. The books under consideration were: *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* by Terry McMillan, *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver, *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers, and *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn. In two classes out of three, *Stella* won hands down. In the other class more than half chose to read *Fallen Angels*, perhaps because male characters and subject matter dominate and that class was three-quarters men. The students had to read about fifty pages per week in order to complete the assignment since *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* has 445 pages. At first they were fearful, but I resolutely scheduled quizzes every other week and most students kept up with the reading. And most were able to answer successfully the final exam essay question on the novel.

The next semester I repeated this process and students chose to read *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat. This is a beautiful coming-of-age novel about a young Haitian girl who goes to live with her estranged mother in New York and eventually reconnects with both her mother and her family in Haiti. We read the novel in about six chunks and had at least a brief discussion of each. By the end of the course students were able to look for repeated symbols and begin to talk about how they connected to the story. They wrote three short

essays on the final exam on the theme, characters and an overall assessment of the impact of the book. The papers showed that even the weakest students had a reasonable grasp of the novel. An additional advantage to this novel was that four Haitian students who had been a bit isolated in the class were drawn in by the Haitian cultural context and setting.

What have I learned from these experiments with pre-college readers and novels? Most students can read a long novel, follow the story, critique and discuss it and answer essay questions about it. They are able to visualize the book as a whole and do some basic literary analysis. They gain confidence, and a sense of pleasure in reading from doing so. I don't yet have all the comparative data to show how this affects their standardized test scores. But I believe it definitely affects their attitude toward reading and their view of themselves as readers. Last June I gave out a summer reading list, and a number of students approached me in the fall to tell me which novels they had read from the list. In addition, ESOL students take a big step forward when reading a novel. They must stop using the dictionary all the time and learn to grasp the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context; it is simply too time-consuming to look up every new word. I also encourage them to give up their translation dictionaries and use a regular English dictionary, so they get fuller sets of meanings for words they feel they really must look up.

What I learned about the structure of the assignment is that, while students want to have a choice, the full responsibility of choosing a novel on their own is perhaps too much for many very inexperienced readers, even with lots of guidance. Thus my earlier versions of the assignment were less successful in getting students to find and commit to reading a book. My second version of the assignment has been much more successful. Giving the class excerpts and asking them to choose as a group from only four book choices was empowering, especially for the weaker students. Having the whole class read the same novel allows discussions to develop and creates positive energy and motivation.

I see an excitement and interest in the class that did not exist when we worked through the textbook drills and readings in earlier semesters. Students get angry, enthusiastic, passionate about issues in the novel. Sometimes these involve adult content regarding sexual issues or violence. Since we are all adults, these are fair game for discussion. I should note that the novels I choose are literary, not pulp. Sex and violence have been a part of great literature at least since Sophocles wrote *Oedipus Rex*, so I feel that it is reasonable to include this kind of material when it occurs in the novel.

My advice to teachers is: Go ahead! Design an assignment based on a novel. Talk about what a novel is, read some short stories to teach some basic concepts and vocabulary about literature, then plunge right in! Let your students in on the joys of losing themselves in a good book.

Footnotes:

1) C. Bazerman, *Reading Skills Handbook* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998); C. Bazerman, *All of Us* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

2) The current text I am using is *Views and Values* by Kari Sayer (Wadsworth, 1996).

3) I first saw this assignment format demonstrated by Elaine Dow at the MATSOL Fall Conference, October 18, 1997, in her session entitled "Challenging Intermediate Level Readers." •

"Seeing" the Essay

by
Christine Luth

When Project Hope began its new term in the fall of 1997, I too began as a new teacher. Being a new member of AmeriCorps, I began teaching full time in the Adult Learning Program with many questions and few answers. Not only was it my first time teaching, but the subject I taught was unappreciated. When I asked the women if they liked writing or ever freely wrote, they all replied with an emphatic "NO!" Later, I understood this reply stemmed from a lack of confidence and skills, but I still wondered if I could ever get them to write willingly.

In the spring, I attended an Inquiry Institute and decided to use this inquiry research approach in my class. Originally, I wanted to find the best way to encourage the women to write more, while improving their grammar skills. The week before the Institute I had given the women a collage assignment. They designed a personal collage; after they finished the "arts and crafts" section they wrote about what they included on the collage. Per the norm, a few did not finish the collage and a few got stuck on the writing, but the ones who did write, wrote freely, without much hassle. From this, it occurred to me that using visual aides might provide a tangible stimulus for their writing.

Thus came the question and direction for my in-

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quiry—how to use visual aids to stimulate writing. I planned to provide the grammatical aspect of the class through these writings, using learners' own work to focus on what they already knew and what they needed. I created six lessons and a follow-up using different visual techniques to evoke writing on themes. As implied previously, the grammatical aspect ideally would occur the next class period, or later in the week. However, there were problems.

Setbacks

At the time, I taught a Reading/Writing and Grammar class once a week to ten low-income, single mothers, who had all experienced homelessness at one time or another. All struggled with the daily hassle of life on welfare or another form of assistance. Anyone working with young single mothers in this situation realizes that homework rarely retains its importance in the face of raising a family. Instead commitments to both attendance and homework are subject to change, depending on what is happening in their children's lives. I sent two lessons home while we finished the book project and many of the women took parts of other lessons home, promising results the next day. Few of the assignments ever made it back to the classroom.

During the spring, students participated in creating the third Project Hope "book project," which also took time. The book project is an opportunity for the women to publish their own writings. Often throughout March and April the literature teacher and I took advantage of inspiration when it came to the women and sacrificed our own classes. The result was both a wonderful book, which stimulated writing in its own way, and yet fewer of my visual assignments completed.

Along with this, many of the women chose to begin testing for the GED. For most of them, this was their first experience with standardized testing in a large group setting. They wanted to be extra-prepared when they went to test, so many began to concentrate on one specific subject area until the test date came. This meant for an entire week I might work with one or two students on the writing test, tutoring them during other class periods until they felt comfortable. They would take the test on Saturday and then not return to my writing class until they realized they needed to take the writing test again, or perhaps not return if they passed it. Instead they would spend extra time with another teacher on her specific subject, until that test was finished.

The biggest obstacle to my writing assignments came from the instructions. Being a new teacher, my challenge the entire year was how to take a lesson in my mind and clarify it on paper for my students. Part of the problem, I began to think, may have been an unclear outcome in my mind. For example, if a painter does not have a fixed idea in her mind how the picture should look at the end of the process, the hand is left without a guide. In this case, I needed a clearer idea of what I wanted from the women in order to form the directions to get there. This is not to say adjustments can not or will not be made; however, the end remains fixed, like a guiding light.

The women wrote that these lessons let them look at writing differently. They no longer viewed it as a chore, but as a way of learning and expression.

What Worked

Despite these setbacks I saw a general improvement in the women's writing. I tried lessons of varying sorts. I found using themes close to home worked best, such as motherhood and women's issues. However, in all cases I found that the theme must tie into their lives. For example, I gave an assignment looking at various portrayals of motherhood. They chose to concentrate on the pictures relating to "heir lives and motherhood, rather than the idyllic or abstract view. The lesson on fashion, a portrayal of women, flopped when the women depicted were models. But, when the women had to look at a photograph of themselves, they wrote honestly and quickly. The leap from how this relates to my everyday life to worldwide ideas was easier. To make this leap, the students' daily life experiences needed to relate in some way to the pictures they wrote about.

I found it hard to teach the women how to compare and contrast with my examples. The lessons I designed focused on the similarities and differences in emotions. I gave them a sheet with several different cartoon faces, each illustrating a different emotion. Many of the faces had very similar expressions for similar emotions; others looked completely different. The object was to describe the emotion, the feelings and actions that come out of it, and then compare it to another one. The first class which tried the lesson ended up frustrated. A few changes in the directions the second time around made things clearer, but the general consensus of the group was that they liked writing about single subjects better.

The collage was by far the best idea I had. It allowed the women to be creative and selective about their writing. Every picture they placed on the collage had its own story. They could "see" the essay developing as they designed the collage. Most of them began by placing pictures of children and toys, and then they would place

pictures that related to their own desires and hobbies. Each group of pictures became its own paragraph. Later someone pointed out that this lesson used multiple ways of learning in its set-up. It allowed the women to work with their hands, to visually see how the collage looked and then to see how this could be turned into an essay. One woman, Lisa, spent so much time designing her picture that she asked if she could finish the writing at home. Without much hope I told her to take the beautiful collage home and bring back the essay in a day or two. At the time, Lisa was five months pregnant and caring for her mother and brothers, as well as her year-old son. Imagine the delight I felt when she returned the next day with a three-page article and she had added to her collage (pictured here)! She liked her description so much she decided to submit the essay to the book project.

One Saturday in May, about five women took their writing exam. The week before we studied hard; actually I believe the proper term is "crammed." Here we had an "ah ha" moment. All my careful building block methods seemed defeated by changing schedules, except for one student with whom I had spent many extra hours. By this time, that student, Kendra, knew enough grammar, but had a "cannot do" attitude about setting up essays. The other two who studied with me were at completely different places in their own grammar knowledge. Therefore, I opted to concentrate on essay set-up, a place where all three of them knew the same amount. There were no pictures here, and we still started slowly, but as I looked at their brainstorms they each stopped me, saying, "I need more details, don't I?" A simple "why?", "describe this," or "what for?" set their minds running again.

This small observation may not seem like much until you recognize how much of an improvement this really was. At the beginning of the year, I would set aside twenty minutes or more for free writing. After five minutes the women would stop, saying, "I don't have anything more to say." The rest of the twenty minutes, I would sit with each woman and ask them question after question, trying to show them how to fill in all the details. Even in February, before the Institute, I spent the majority of the time attempting to teach them how to flesh out their writings. Now they stopped me before I asked the questions and said, "I need more detail here, don't I?" The best part was that, although they groaned a little, they didn't mind it.

When they came back from the exam I expected at least one person to come to me upset, but all five of them walked in and said, "Oh, that was easy. We just did what you said to do. But I think I can do better if I have to take it again." Keep in mind, these were the same students who emphatically agreed they did not like writing and would not take that exam until the last possible moment. To me this showed that my style of teaching had worked and they felt much more comfortable with their writing abilities.

Amazingly, the next week Kendra offered to type part of Natalie's free-write for the book project to help her catch up. As she typed it, Kendra pointed out errors and ways to condense Natalie's stream of consciousness style. Not only had Kendra taken the initiative to type, she even began to peer-edit and corrected mistakes as she went. The women rarely ever wanted to type, and they never felt confident enough to fix any writing errors of their own, much less anyone else's.

Next, during a particularly bad week for my student Maria, I asked her to help me teach a class on setting up essays. I wanted her to help tutor while I helped others. She looked at me like I was crazy, but she came to class. While I helped one student, another clamored, "Chris, I need help!" Maria leaned over and began to show her. Up to that moment I was unsure if Maria trusted herself to impart to others what she previously learned. Neither Kendra nor Maria had ever shown much confidence in their writing abilities; now, at the end of the year, they helped teach others with very little nudging.

The last week of class I tried to meet with the women and have them correct a few of their own sentences from past papers. They recognized easily when a sentence was

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too long, and suggested how to fix it. They could tell when some rules of grammar had been violated, although they could not always name the reason. Finally, I asked the class to write an evaluation on what helped them and how they felt about writing, both past and present. The women wrote that these lessons let them look at writing differently. They no longer viewed it as a chore, but as a way of learning and expression.

Seeing Progress

My goal at the beginning was to help the students become less afraid of writing and more comfortable with their own abilities. In their evaluations, one woman stated that she liked the visuals because they gave her something tangible to write about and to give her opinion on. I felt, from comments such as this one, that the pictures made the writing more comfortable. It allowed the women to be less personal and yet gave them space to give their opinions. The confidence shown by the few women who began to help tutor their classmates showed how much they had grown in their writing skills. With this confidence their writings became richer and full of detail. They still feel as though they have little grammatical knowledge, but in reality they instinctively know and trust their knowledge more.

Using visual aids to stimulate writing was a great tool for me. Visual aids based on pertinent themes, combined with clear, simplified instructions, stimulated students' desire to write; they wanted to tell their stories. However, to teach grammar and essay set-up at the same time can be time consuming. It won't be accomplished in a few lessons. Flexibility is a must. Learners do not learn linearly; thus the process is constantly changing. A lesson you expected to end here, will digress off to there. At the end of the process, the women claimed to be more confident with writing, and enjoyed it more. They were able to edit their own work and reached out to help one another.

Appendix: Brief Description of Lessons

Lesson 1: Personal Collage—We made a personal collage using craft supplies (magazine pictures, drawing utensils, etc.). Each collage was an individual expression of things important to us. The pictures and designs on the collages were then explained to the audience through essay form. Each picture or group of pictures became a jumping off point for the women to explain what it represented, why it was important, how this related to them.

Lesson 2: Objective and Subjective—We described a random individual in a picture: who is she?, what does she do?, where is she?, etc. Then we took pictures of ourselves and looked at them objectively, answering similar questions as if we were a strangers viewing ourselves for the first time.

Lesson 3: Motherhood—This lesson was sent home. We began with several different pictures on motherhood taken from *Art of Motherhood*, compiled by Susan Bracaglia Tobey (NY, NY: Abbevelle Press Inc., 1991). The students each chose to take one home and were to write on how it did or did not relate to their own experience of motherhood. The ones that went home were the ones that drew upon knowledge of motherhood in ways that were directly related to their own lives.

Lesson 4: Portrayal of Women—We took a fashion magazine and tried to describe why the women were photographed as they were, what this meant to the portrayal of women. This flopped, as the women cared very little what was happening to rich fashion models in Europe.

Lesson 5: Transparencies of GED Exam Essays—We looked together at a GED essay on "The Perfect Job," graded at a 1 (the lowest possible score on the GED's holistic scoring scale of 1 to 6). We made corrections and thought about what else could be added. Then we brainstormed our own perfect job. We then took another essay on the same question, this one graded at a 6. We looked at the organization and the differences between essays graded 1 and 6. Then we took our brainstorming and created an outline and finally an essay. We then practiced these skills with other GED questions.

Lesson 6: Compare and Contrast—We took different cartoons of emotions, brainstormed how the image looked, and described the feeling without using the word. For example, saying "I feel happy" for the emotion "happy" was not enough. Students were to give the actions a person would do and to describe the feelings, such as "butterflies in my stomach." They completed the process on two different emotions, and then they were to go back and compare and contrast.

Lesson 7: Final Check—I gave the students a worksheet with their own sentences on it. They had to peer-edit these sentences. Then I asked them to write an evaluation for this semester, asking them to describe how they felt about writing when they began the program versus now, what they had learned, and what techniques had helped them. •

Notes on Contributors

Charissa Ahlstrom has been with the Jamaica Plain Community Center's Adult Learning Program for two years, teaching ESOL and coordinating their ESOL department. Before that, she coordinated and taught at Ingles Para la Comunidad in Washington Heights, New York City.

Joanne Arnaud has been Executive Director of the Boston Adult Literacy Fund since 1989.

Sharon Carey is the Director of Adult Education at Project Place in Boston, where she has taught GED and administered other adult education programs for the last six years. She also taught at Boston Medical Center with the Worker Education Program. Before moving to Boston in 1993, she taught high school English and theater for twenty years at Miss Porter's School in Farmington.

Anson Green is the instructor of the Culebra Road TANF/JOBS class for Northside Independent School District in San Antonio, Texas, and a member of El Paso Community College's Project IDEA Master Teacher Professional Development Initiative. As a member of the Project IDEA team, he has facilitated a number of project-based learning activities focusing on women's lives, including a student-generated webpage.

Marie Hassett, Ph.D., is a consultant, teacher, and writer on educational issues. She has taught in the public schools and as an education professor in Massachusetts and Indiana, and currently teaches ABE, ESOL, and Career Development Workshops in the Boston area. She consults with programs on curricular, programmatic, and staff development issues.

Christine Luth taught as an AmeriCorps volunteer at Project Hope in Boston.

Martha Merson has worked at the Adult Literacy Resource Institute for over seven years. She believes people should follow singer Cosy Sheridan's advice and do "whatever scares you enough to keep you awake."

Adam Ross is a GED teacher at the Blackstone Community Center and has taught GED classes in the South End of Boston for the past two yers. Outside of class, he spends his time finishing his BFA at Massachusetts College of Art.

Dianne Roy works with adult learners in Vermont to assist them in reaching their fullest potential.

Nancy Teel is a professor of English at Roxbury Community College. She is currently writing fiction and memoirs. She has worked with adults in the Boston area for seventeen years.

Felipe Vaquerano was born in El Salvador and came to the United States back in 1988 when the war in his country was at the worst stage. He began learning English in 1989 at the Jackson Mann Community Center, where he also began teaching in 1992 through the project "From the Community to the Community." He currently works for the Community Learning Center in Cambridge and the Harborside Community Center in East Boston and says he loves teaching!

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